やはり俺の青春ラブコメはまちがっている

My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.

渡 航【wataru watari】
illustration ぽんかん⑧

10
ten

GAGAGA

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hachiman hikigaya
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komachi hikigaya

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iroha isshiki

First Memorandum

Possibly, it's **no one's monologue**.

Mine has been a life of much shame.

My eyes abruptly focused on that sentence.

I was in the middle of a lot of cleaning with the upcoming New Year. As I organized my book collection, I found myself reaching out to a book.

The reason why I ended up picking out this book amongst the many was because I felt some kind of link with the three worded title.

No Longer Human.

I think it was about the time I got into middle school that I read this book.

When I made it halfway through the second memorandum, I closed the book in a hurry and never managed to read much of it beyond that. Back then, the difficulty was a little out of my league and as a middle school student, it was fairly tedious as well. I had plenty of other fun things to read too, so it wasn't like I was starving for entertainment that I needed to go through the trouble of reading a fastidious and offensive book like this.

That's exactly why I closed the book.

In that book, it felt as if I was getting dragged to the surface, as if my true nature that I was still continuing to hide to this day was getting exposed.

I felt it was possible that even the reason why I attempted to read this book when I was in middle school was written in that book as well.

Despite that, the reason I was reading this book this late now was because I thought it was just something to be thrown out. I took it with my hands in astonishment.

But thinking about it even more, there was no way I could throw out this book.

They say that bookshelves are a reflection of a person's personality.

In that case, I'm sure this book was a reflection of my true nature. That's why, the only thing I could do in the end was just put it away without tossing it and pretend as if I had never seen it.

Yet here I am, reaching out to it again.

Could it have been a divine oracle, or possibly fate?

I wasn't one to take those words seriously, but it wasn't very pleasant knowing how it seemed like I was reinforcing the notion instead by being up in arms and denying it.

I wiped off the collected dust on the book and dropped onto the couch.
Let’s continue the book; continue on from where I couldn’t back then.
Because it’s likely that I needed to see what will happen from there on.

Chapter 1

At last, **Hikigaya Komachi** makes a prayer to the gods.

It became completely dark out as I was reading my book.

One of my bad habits that take hold of me when I was in the middle of a big cleanup or tidying things up was my "oops, I started reading a book habit".

Close call there… If what I was reading just now was a series, I would've found myself entranced in a reading marathon. And once I finished all the volumes, I'd end up spouting, "When's the next volume coming out? Hurry up and do your job, author!"

I lifted myself up from the sofa I was laying down on and returned the book I finished reading back to the shelf.

With this, my big cleanup was all done. Nothing was actually tidied up, but whatever, I was done.

In life, so as long as you were unable to get rid of your past stains, then I had to say, ultimately, cleanups were an impossible endeavor and thus, meaningless. If life was the stain itself, then regardless of what you tried, you'd never see an end to cleaning up your life.

At any rate, since I was at least able to organize my bookshelf in my room, I made my return to the living room in triumph.

Only a few more days were left of this year.

Supposedly tomorrow was the last business day of the year for my parents. They had a lot of piled up work that needed to be taken care of so they were going to be running late tonight as well. For that reason, my mom had done her cleaning little by little as time permitted. Before long, the living room was neatly tidied up.

But in the neat living room, there was an individual sprawled out on the floor, emitting some kind of ominous aura.

It was my little sister, Hikigaya Komachi.

Her upper body poked out from the kotatsu and she was lying face down. Riding on her back was our beloved cat, Kamakura, who was grooming himself with his tongue.

"What's wrong with you…?" I asked her on reflex, but there was no reply. It's just a corpse…[1] *Oh, c'mon, Komachi, dying here of all places, a little pathetic, you know…*

However, it looked rough having a cat on her back. It was almost as if she had been possessed by an earthbound spirit as she didn't budge at all. On that note, I'd

really like it if we could decide on whether an earthbound spirit cat was a cat, spirit, or a demon already, meow.

I made my way into the kotatsu while lifting Kamakura off of Komachi's back and loaded him onto my lap. Kamakura kneaded my lap to get comfortable, drooped his head and flopped over, sleeping again. *Sorry for the bad sleeping spot. Forgive me, meow ♪!*

When I relieved Komachi of the weight on her back, she lifted her head.

"Ah, onii-chan…"

My little sister who was always adorable had the sinking, rotten eyes of a fish. Oh my, you're just like your older brother! We really are siblings! So if Komachi's cute and I was similar to her, then that meant I was cute! But, wait, those rotten eyes were seriously not cute. So if Komachi's usual cuteness wasn't enough to make her look cute, didn't that mean I wasn't cute, like, at all?

Anyway, this was the first time I've ever seen Komachi look so backed up against the wall.

"Komachi, you okay…?"

"No… I'm done for…" Komachi grumbled and buried her face into her cushion again. She then uttered a delirious mutter with a fragmented voice. "Must, get to cleaning… Gotta, throw away the trash… Need, to toss out onii-trash…"

"Calm down Komachi. The house cleanup is more or less done. Also, it ain't that easy cleaning up your onii-chan. You'd better be prepared for the long haul."

"Uuugh, as far as Komachi's concerned, I just want you to get married off already…"

She gave me a disgruntled look, but there really wasn't much I could do about that. That's like on the same hurdle as trying to marry off Hiratsuka-sensei, probably. *As if you could marry off a guy as bothersome as me…* But this wasn't the time to be setting up my defensive barriers. Komachi was the issue here.

For the most part, I had an idea as to why Komachi turned out this way. It was probably because of her exams. "Studying's too hard", "The mock exams went totally bad", basically stuff like that.

Ever since Christmas had ended, Komachi had muscled through days and nights of studying, but with the New Year right around the corner, she was now out of steam.

Mumbling and sobbing, Komachi said, "Crap, crap crap…"

She then made a glance at me.

When I went quiet, Komachi shoved her face into the cushion again. She spoke with a muffled voice. "Sniff, uugh, I'm soooo tired…"

She then made a glance at me.

Man, she's a freaking pain… However, I was a senior veteran onii-chan boasting fifteen years of service. It was times like these where I made sure to understand the right kinds of words to tell her.

"Well, you know. Just studying all the time is a bit constraining. It's almost New Year's Eve, so why don't we take a breather and go somewhere far for our first shrine visit of the year?"

"Sure!" Komachi instantly answered and abruptly rose from her position.

It looked like I was spot on. Of course, since I was a professional onii-chan, that's par for the course here. As a matter of fact, I think this country should go ahead and prepare an onii-chan occupation. What the heck is an onii-chan occupation? Is that, like, being raised by your younger sister? Now that's what I'd call an invincible job. Then again, that's still considered being unemployed.

But as a professional onii-chan, I wouldn't spoil her too much. I made sure to remind her.

"That's fine, but you'll have to study your butt off until then."

"I know, I know. I can study better if I have something fun planned later, you know?"

I told her, but she wasn't listening to me at all. She sat back up and reached out to a mandarin orange. *Mmhm, I mean it's fine if you're motivated now…*

"Any shrines you want to visit? Like a place that might give you its blessing or something."

"Mmm…"

When I asked her, she began thinking.

It just might be that for test taking students, the very first shrine they visit for the New Year was a considerably important event. There was also the saying, "Whenever you're in trouble, pray to the gods".

If you're seriously in a bad situation, then gods were the only ones you could rely on. Most people weren't exactly reliable, after all. So the fact that you weren't relying on people could also mean that you were relying pretty much on only gods in your everyday life. A pinchy pinch was a pinch no matter what. A time like that would be where I'd like a Ultra-something.[2]

"If it's in this area, we can try the one that dad goes to. You know, the one he said he stayed up all night just to line up for. Kameido Tenjin Shrine or something?"

It was just one train ride on the Sobu Line from our place, so it wasn't that far off. Of course, since we're going to pray to the god of learning, it should be expected to be pretty congested given the season. When the thought of being in that crowd came to mind, I couldn't help but make a "blech" face, I mean, I don't like crowds after all ☆!

And for some reason, Komachi made a “blech” expression too.

“All-nighter… That’s one of the things that makes dad so gross…”

He’s a good father, give him a break... You know, if it wasn’t for mom stopping him, pops would’ve gone straight to Dazaifu, you know… I had the feeling she stopped him from doing all-nighters too.

“Well, putting pops aside, there’s also the god of learning at Yushima Tenjin…”

This shrine also had a god of learning, so it was incredibly popular during the exam season. In other words, it should be expected to be pretty congested given the season—etc, etc.

As I pondered over the possible candidates, Komachi groaned.

“Mmm, famous places are nice too, but… I think a place close to a high school might give me better luck!”

“Yeah? In that case… I guess Sengen Shrine would be one.”

“Ahh, that’s the one that’s always holding festivals.”

“No, not always.”

What kinds of shrines always hold festivals? Talk about having no feelings of appreciation. Are they stores in front of Akihabara station running a store closing sale? Just how much every day is everyday?[3]

But I guess it was natural for Komachi, who wasn’t familiar with Sengen Shrine, to have only an image of festivals associated with it. It being a big tourist spot was one thing, but actually making a visit to a neighborhood shrine typically only happened during the first visit of the year or when there was a festival.

But Sengen Shrine, huh…? I had the feeling there’d be a lot of acquaintances there, so I wasn’t feeling very up for it, but it was preferable to a local shrine. I didn’t want to meet any colleagues from middle school too. Actually, I didn’t even feel like going anywhere now, you know?

As if my hesitation was showing, Komachi gave me a considerate look.

“What is it?” I asked.

Komachi adjusted her sitting as if readying herself. “Oh, you know, onii-chan. It’s not like we need to go together or anything. I don’t mind going with mom too.”

Mmmm, you naturally just left pops out, didn’tcha? That’s pops for you, yep.

Anyway, I had a rough idea of the reason why she was being considerate like that. She may act the way she is, but she had her thoughts on me as her older brother. No, no, onii-chan had his own thoughts concerning himself too, you know? It’s just I was having trouble understanding those thoughts were since I was still unsure as to how to conduct myself.

That's why this winter break of slightly less than two weeks was something I was grateful for. Of course, once school started up again, I'd have to confront the issue again.

But for now, I was on break. And since it was the break, it was my style to rest with every fiber of my being. As someone aiming to be a full-time house husband, brain usage during the breaks was out of the question. Put off the conclusion of your proposal, take it home and think on it. That's what they call the knowledge of corporate slaves! Wait, so is that being a corporate slave or a full-time house husband…?

In order to rest as much as possible and also postpone things further, I decided to change the subject.

"I don't need your bothersome consideration, jeez."

"Oh you, if possible, I'd like to avoid that myself." Komachi made an ostentatious sigh.*Sorry, little sis, for being this kind of onii-chan.*

"Well, if you're not going Komachi, then I'll just go by myself like every other year. Less to worry about and it's easier for me."

"There you go again, saying things like that…"

"As the ancients once said, New Year's Day is the day to plan for the coming year. That is, if I make unpleasant memories on my first shrine visit, then the coming year is set to be a year full of unpleasant memories. First thing right into the New Year and you want to make make the unpleasant memory of being in a crowd of people? A foolish notion, do you not agree, Komachi-kun?"

I eloquently preached to Komachi who had a fed up face. She looked unamused at first, but now she was nodding her head, and then lifted her head and sent me a serious gaze.

"That makes sense. New Year's Day is the day to plan for the coming year… Okay, maybe I'll go with you then, onii-chan."

"R-Right… Why'd you change your mind?"

She was looking at me as if I was trash just a second ago, but now she had an earnest face, a complete 180 from earlier. She then made a perky smile.

"I mean, if I go with onii-chan on New Year's Day, then that would mean I'll be with onii-chan all year long. That's just so high in Komachi points."

"Y-Yeah. I, guess…"

The words that she told me head-on caused my mind to freeze.

……

…Oh my gosh, what's with this cute sister of mine!? Ignoring that cliché phrase she always adds at the end of her sentences, my little sister is super cute!

"Ko-Komachi…"

As I was sobbing, moved to tears from what she had said to me, Komachi puffed her flushed cheeks and looked away. She then gave me a side-long glance.

"D-Don't get me wrong, okay! What I meant by being together with onii-chan is that since we'll be going to the same school next year, it'll be something like a prayer for exam success, okay! That just now was really high in Komachi points, okay!"

Ughh, what a cheap tsundere… Wasn't that just some cheap Portopia[4] criminal? The criminal was Yasu. Crap, now I feel depressed.

Her forced little act wasn't exactly the cutest thing, but if I pretended she was just trying to hide her embarrassment, then actually, maybe it'd be okay to call her cute.

"In that case, let's go together then."

"Okay. Alrighty, I'll go try studying some more in my room." Komachi got out of the kotatsu and stood up as she spoke.

"Right on, have fun."

While Kamakura was sleeping on my lap, I grabbed his front legs, waved them to Komachi, and she laughed.

"I gotcha, I'll do my best!" said Komachi. She picked up her cellphone and fondled Kamakura little by little while humming a tune and went to her room.

The only ones remaining in the living room was just Kamakura and me. When Kamakura went *funsu*[5] with his nose, I shook his legs. He woke up looking upset and did a stretch. He then squirmed his way into the kotatsu.

I followed his model and crept into the kotatsu up to my shoulder, becoming a kotatsu snail.

Only a little more remained of this year.

Like every year, it was a peaceful New Year's Eve.

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The New Year started off safely.

Happy New Year.

Somehow, having to exchange that greeting with family members felt really shameless or it felt kind of stupid in some way.

However, I had to put up with it so I could get my New Year's allowance. Indeed, my elite education to become a corporate slave had already started since I was an infant. If it's for the sake of receiving money, then I could easily turn a blind eye to just a little injustice and irrationality, bow my head which I didn't even want to bow, and wear a faint, servile smile. That's what being a corporate slave was all about!

As those trifling thoughts ran through my mind, I safely received my New Year's allowance this year as well. Many ages ago, that money was absorbed by the mysterious "mom's bank" institution and now, there should've been quite the savings in there. Once it was time to leave the house, it's likely that money would be returned to me. Probably, it should, for sure. I believe in her. I pray that she doesn't remove the M from MOTHER[6]and become an OTHER.

Since I was able to procure my money without any problems this year as well, I laid in the kotatsu and lazed about.

Instead of a pillow, I sat in a tatami chair and fiddled with my cellphone.

When New Year's Eve approached, my cellphone was vibrating unusually a lot this year whereas every other year, never.

They were "Happy New Year" messages.

I received a stupidly long and formal mail as soon as the start of the New Year, a simplistic, yet stupidly cute mail, and a mail that was like some sort of written prophecy from an unknown sender… Yeah, stuff like that. I thought I was going to receive just one more dumb mail, but nothing came. It's not like I was expecting it or anything. I hastily dealt with the chuuni-like mail and the mail with a raging storm amount of words by replying to them with whatever.

But I was at a loss with the remaining mail, the simplistic series, "THE Cute Mail". If I went all out and responded with a long reply, that'd be creepy, but on the other hand, sending back a reply that was annoyingly spruced up with images and emoji would've been disgusting too. That left me with replying back in standard fashion, but that could give off a cold impression since it'd be too blunt.

Life would be easier if there was some kind of template like they had with New Year's cards that laid out most of its design for you… It's convenient since it was obvious whether the New Year's card was just a simple formality or not. Things like New Year's cards were usually plastered with illustrations and photo prints and once you filled in the remaining white space with "Let's hang out again!" or "Let's go drink again!", your card would be complete. Seriously, Japan's culture was quite impressive. Also, it's abnormal how successful college students were using "Let's go drink again!" whenever they were in a tight spot. If they drank so much throughout the year, I definitely thought they were going to become dependent on alcohol. Why that didn't actually happen was because they only said that as a formality, so in reality, they never really did go out to drink together, I'm sure…

While thinking of those things, I typed my reply, erased it, typed it, erased it, typed it, erased it, typed it—Eraaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaase it! Rewriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiite it![7] Rinse and repeat.

I want to reply with a long message, but if it's too long, that might be kind of revolting. But if it's too short, then I might come off as cold instead. Feeling apprehensive of what to do, I decided to reply back with a similar word count

instead. This was what they called “mirroring” in psychology. By emulating the actions of the other party, your affection levels would increase!

“Onii-chan, ready to go?”

As I was typing my messages, Komachi called out to me.

I checked the time and it was just about nine in the morning. Our parents had already left for Kameido Tenjin Shrine. For us two, it was as good a time as any to be on our way.

“Yeah… Let’s get going.”

After confirming that my messages went through properly, I crawled out of the kotatsu and stood up.

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It was several stations of being in a shaking, packed train. We went along with the waves of people that were spat out from the ticket gate, walking down the gently sloping hill until we finally reached the first archway gate of Sengen Shrine.

These large archways that overlooked National Route 14 were said to have once been in the sea. This was tweeted by the official CHI-BA+KUN account[8], so there’s no doubt about it. And it’s likely, long ago, it had a majestic view similar to the UNIESCO World Heritage Site, Itsukushima Shrine. In other words, there was a small possibility of Chiba becoming a UNESCO World Heritage Site; I’ve already thought so internally.

“Man, this is one crazy turnout…”

The obvious result of my own personal UNESCO World Heritage Site… It sure is popular…

“It’s the biggest temple in the area, right? Of course everyone’s gonna come here, you know?”

I see, that’s true too… It then hit me. If everyone was coming here, thinking on it again, didn’t that mean people from my school could easily make their way here…?

Crap, I go to a local shrine every year, so it completely slipped my mind…

When that thought floated in my head, Komachi who was next to me began looking around restlessly.

“Oh, there they are.”

She then pushed through the crowd and continued on.

“H-Hey, Komachi. Where you going?”

You’re a test taking student, okay? So you need to hold onii-chan’s hand so you don’t fall and slip and become a lost child, heck, onii-chan’s going to princess carry you! In the direction of my stretched out hand were faces I was familiar with.

“Happy New Year to you both!”

Komachi rushed over to them looking ready to hug them and the girl ahead cheerfully lifted her hand. When she did, her bright brown bun of hair shook.

“Happy New Year and yahallo!”

“What’s with that greeting…? Happy New Year,” I answered, flabbergasted.

Yuigahama was dressed in a vertically knitted beige coat, a long scarf was wrapped around her neck, and her raised hand was entirely covered with a mitten.

The girl immediately next to her was wearing a white coat and peeking out from under plaited mini-skirt were her legs in black tights. She was Yukinoshita Yukino.

“…Happy New Year,” said Yukinoshita, burying her face in her scarf. Well, formally doing New Year greetings was embarrassing in one way or another. I found myself fiddling with the ends of my scarf as well.

“Ahh… Yeah, right. Happy New Year.”

“Okay, let’s go make our visit,” said Komachi, and she proceeded into the crowd of people. We followed right behind her.

As we were walking, I nudged Komachi's back. "Komachi-chan, can onii-chan ask you something?"

"What's that?"

I secretly walked up next to Komachi and lowered my voice. "Why are they here?"

"A meeting with Komachi ☆!"

"Wait, a meeting…?" I said with a perturbed voice and she pouted.

"They're my friends, so what's the big deal?"

"Well, sure… But inviting them is, you know, how should I put it?" I said, scratching my cheeks as I was thinking.

Don't you normally call friends from your school for these kinds of events? Well, not that I knew what "normally" was since I didn't have any friends in middle school. I wonder if it's something like that. Maybe it was the apparition's fault? Maybe it was. So this was what they called a loner apparition, huh…?

However, the fact that Komachi was meeting up with her old brother for something like this made me worried about her relationships. I had a pensive look, but Komachi had an idea of what I was going to say and forcibly cleared her throat.

"Well, think of the season right now. Choosing not to invite your friends is like a form of manners, you know…" said Komachi, straightly.

I see, I get it now. So the reason why she didn't choose to invite her friends was because of how nervous they were during this exam season.

Exams drew a boundary.

It's a pretty common story: friends take exams for the same school, only for one group to fail and the other to pass. When you hear about couples failing to get into the same school, it made food delicious and when that acts as the trigger for their falling out and their eventual break up, food became Susumu-kun's food[9].

If they're around the middle school age, then their friendships were definitely going to get fractured. Especially in the case where they decided to take tests for a college prep school, someone was bound to be left out since there was a limit to who could get in. And the person who was left out would sever his ties with them as soon as he was able. If it was me, that's what I would've done.

It's because you were embarrassed, frustrated, bitter, and jealous. If there's a time when those ill feelings surfaced, then there's also going to be a time where you restrained yourself, smiled, and then cut your relationships afterwards.

Being aware of your eventual break up was a rather complicated thing. If you wanted to graduate with a smile, shouldn't you avoid approaching your friends too much? And that's where having no friends was super convenient! Hachiman thinks that at exam prep schools, they should start off with teaching with how to destroy friendships!

That's why a time like this was where having friends with a slight age disparity allowed you to take a breather. Both parties could interact with each other without feeling constrained.

Even now, the three of them would noisily chat with each other while walking, Komachi speaking to Yukinoshita and Yuigahama and them returning a smile to her. To Komachi, who had been stuck studying during the winter break, this might've been a moment of relaxation for her.

In the waves of people, Yuigahama made darting glances around the area. It looked like she was having trouble deciding on what food stall to line up on the sides of the main path.

"Wow, it's like a festival here," said Yuigahama, and Komachi's face suddenly lit up.

"I know! Ah, do you want to eat something?"

"Totally! Then, maybe… I'll go with candy apples?"

It looked like they were going to wander away from the main path while they were talking. Yukinoshita, who was next to them, tugged down her scarf and stopped them.

"We'll do that after we visit the shrine," said Yukinoshita.

"Okaaaay…"

The two then reluctantly returned to the crowd of people.

That was one sisterly exchange they had going there… There's, like, no place for onii-chan here, you know…

Whether it was because of Yukinoshita's dependable personality, Yuigahama's affinity to comply with other people, or the globally notorious little sister, Hikigaya Komachi's sister attribute of getting people to do things; whatever reason it may be, for those girls with an age gap, their compatibility wasn't bad at all.

Yuigahama guided everyone by walking ahead, Komachi followed her with smiles, and Yukinoshita watched over the two of them quietly while going with them from behind.

I walked and watched the three of them from the farthest in the back.

And then, it was that moment. I felt a discomfort from my "sisterly exchange" thought I had earlier.

…This isn't good.

Because I had to think of such an incredibly stupid thing first thing in the New Year that the corners of mouth had somehow curved up, a smiling breaking out on my face on its own. I pulled up my scarf as if trying to hide it.

Incidentally, I looked away from the front and my eyes swam around in the crowded waves of people.

Couldn't they do something about this crowd somehow, I wonder? My train of thought had me on the verge of vomiting. *I want to go straight home right now…*

But once we made it up to the precincts of the temple after the stone steps, the congestion had dwindled somewhat.

It's probably because there weren't any food stalls set up in the precincts. Since the shrine was right in front of us, everyone went straight to it without dilly dallying around. We joined the crowd as well and found ourselves in front of the shrine.

"What's everyone gonna wish for?"

"You don't do something like that on your first shrine visit. This isn't Tanabata, you know…"

"That's true. This isn't exactly something that would actually grant you your wish, after all."

"Wooow, both of you are so boring!" Komachi said with a horrified expression and Yuigahama agreed with her.

"Yeah, you two! I mean we're praying to the gods, so it's better for us to ask for something since we'll get benefit from it!"

Crap, I have no idea what mysterious logic she used to advance her argument there.

Yukinoshita pressed against her temple as if having trouble comprehending as well and sighed. "Okay… Well, I suppose we can leave it at that. However, I feel like the nuance is closer to making an oath than anything else."

Yukinoshita made a sudden smile. Yuigahama made a big nod and jumped at her arm. Both of them tossed their offerings and shook the bells together. They did two bows and two claps. Then, they quietly closed their eyes.

A pledge before an altar in front of a lot of people somehow gave off an air of grandiose.

Copying those two, I went through with the custom and clapped my hands together.

A wish… or something to make an oath to, huh…?

I made a sidelong glance at Yukinoshita and Yuigahama.

Yukinoshita was quiet with her eyes closed, faintly breathing out. Yuigahama was groaning "mmmm!" while wrinkling her brow. Just what it was that those two wished for and made an oath to, I didn't know.

Similarly, I shut my eyes. I didn't have a wish-like wish, but I felt I wanted there to be things that I could manage to do depending on my efforts without wishing for them.

For now, I hope Komachi will safely pass her tests… Because really, this was the one thing I had absolutely no power over.

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After paying tribute to the shrine, we were finally released from the crowd of people.

I scanned the wide precincts and there were shrine maidens, shrine maidens, and nurses all over the place. Just kidding, there weren't any nurses.

Discovering something in the wide precincts, Yuigahama raised her voice. "Oh, fortune slips!"

"…Let's go pull some then."

We lined up and took turns pulling a fortune slip. We shook some kind of hexagonal wooden box that was filled with sticks. I informed the shrine maiden the number of the stick that came out and opened the fortune slip I received.

"Small luck…"

Now that's just odd… However, for just 100 yen, even if I didn't get anything impressive, I had to accept it. I looked over the list on the slip and every single entry was odd. Just how odd? As odd as writing down regarding your health, "be aware of presymptomatic diseases".

I worried over whether I should tie it or not since I couldn't say it was a bad pull as a whole and that was when Yukinoshita, who was next to me, casually showed me what she received.

"…Good luck." Yukinoshita wore a winning smile and told me.

Wait, was good luck all that much better than small luck? If anything, it's not all that impressive since it's just so normal, you know? But well, if Yukinoshita was elated about it, I suppose it was a more fortunate pull.

Competitive as always, huh… I thought. Then, going "ehehe", Yuigahama showed off her slip to us.

"I got excellent luck!"

"…I see. I'm glad for you," said Yukinoshita, her eyes candidly firing up. *Is she going to be okay…? This girl's not going to keep buying slips until she gets excellent luck, right…?*

As I watched over the two in suspense, appearing from Yukinoshita's shadow was Komachi with a stiff and gloomy expression.

"I got bad luck…"

For a test taking student to get bad luck… Yuigahama, who had been smiling gleefully, and Yukinoshita, who had been burning up with a confronting spirit, lost their words. *The mood's totally getting depressing here…*

Yukinoshita coughed as if to alleviate the situation and gently patted Komachi's shoulders. "You'll be fine, Komachi-san. There's already this ill-omened thing in your family already, so this isn't that big of a deal."

"Is that your idea of encouragement…? Well, look here, Komachi. Don't let these fortune slips bug you too much. In about a week, you'll forget what you even pulled."

"You're one to talk…"

"It kinda feels like my excellent luck doesn't feel so amazing anymore…"

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama made complicated expressions after looking at their slips. That's weird… Instead of trying their best to cheer up my little sister, they just made the mood even more depressing.

And it was that moment. Yuigahama clapped her hands together in realization of something.

"Ah, I know. Here, let's trade," said Yuigahama, and she held out her slip to Komachi.

"Eh, are you sure?"

"Yeah!"

At a loss to accept the slip despite being answered with a smile, Komachi looked at me.

"Well, it's a lucky charm. Don't be shy."

At any rate, it was a fortune slip of excellent luck from Yuigahama who, somehow, bizarrely managed to pass the tests to get into our school. Perhaps it had some amount of blessing to it. It might even be possible to distort fate or defy the laws of physics with it.

"Thank you very much… I'll try my best!"

"Uh huh. If you become my junior, I'd be happy, too," said Yuigahama.

She handed her fortune slip to Komachi and in return, took her slip of bad luck. Yukinoshita who was watching them placed her hand to her chin and started thinking of something.

"Yuigahama-san, do you mind if I borrow your slip for a moment?"

"Eh? Sure…"

Yukinoshita took the slip from Yuigahama and tied her own slip with Yuigahama's together.

"We can average them out like this and we'll both have small luck."

“What kind of math are you doing there?”

Add bad luck and good luck, divide it by two, and then multiply it by two? The math was on the side of the sciences while the concept was on the side of humanities. Was this some kind of recent fad mixing of the sciences and humanities, I wonder?

“So now we’re all matching,” said Yuigahama, happily.

Yukinoshita then made a satisfied smile. “That’s true… With this, our pulls are all even.”

“That’s what you were after!?”

“What’s with that messed up way of solving things like you’d do in a pressure-free education[10]…?”

That’s like having everyone at a school arts festival dress up as Momotarou[11], hold hands, and cut the goal tape together.

“I’m joking,” said Yukinoshita, and smiled.

Komachi excitedly put away the fortune slip she received in her wallet and shot up her face. “Since we’re done with our visit and pulled our fortunes, what should we do now?”

“Let’s check out the stalls!”

When Yuigahama suggested, who had been ready to check the stalls since earlier on our way to the precincts, Yukinoshita nodded.

The shrine path was the road home anyway. I didn’t have any problems with it. Not that I had any say, since the three of them had already started walking off.

When we returned to the path we came from, the section of lining food stalls came into view. Along with the standard okonomiyaki and takoyaki stalls, they also had stalls with amazake[12], apparently appropriate for the season.

Amongst the lines of food stalls was a shooting gallery. I looked at it wondering if a stall like this you’d typically see at a summer festival should be out during the winter and I heard a gasping voice next to me.

“Why is there a shooting gallery here on the New Year…?” Yukinoshita gazed fixedly at the gallery as if saying “…how strange”.

“Well, it is weird, but there’ll be children coming, so isn’t it normal to show up since it’s a good time to make money?”

“That makes no sense… Why is it at a place like this…?”

But Yukinoshita continued to stare at the shooting gallery, looking like she wasn’t listening to what I was saying at all. And at the gallery, there was some kind of Pan-san the Panda item there. *Ahh, so that’s why you were gazing at it…*

“…Want to give the shooting gallery a go?”

“No, that’s not—“ said Yukinoshita, fidgeting. *Oh, she clearly wants to get her hands on it…*

She continued gazing at the Pan-san-like item while mumbling. It didn’t look like she was going to budge unless she won the item. *What to do, I’m not particularly confident in the game, but maybe I’ll give it a try…*

When I took into account the condition of my pocket, Yuigahama raised a small voice.

“Ah.”

She then tugged at my sleeve.

“What is it?”

“Mm,” said Yuigahama, beckoning me over to her. It looked like she wanted me to crouch down for a moment. I followed her instructions and slightly lowered my head and Yuigahama moved her face closer to my ears looking to make some secret talk.

Taking this kind of stance was obviously going to bring our positions closer together. It wasn’t something to be surprised about at this point, so I didn’t need to be so conscious about it.

Nevertheless, with the drifting smell of citrus tickling my nose, and her faintly pink cheeks exposed to the winter wind approaching right before my eyes, I found it difficult to face her.

After taking a shallow, quiet breath, I urged Yuigahama to go on with a look and Yuigahama let out a small, small sigh. She then began talking in whispers into my ears.

“Hey, what should we do about our shopping for Yukinon’s present?” asked Yuigahama.

“Ah, ahhh…”

I gave it some thought.

Yukinoshita’s birthday was coming up very soon. The other day on Christmas, when we had the chance, we made the promise of going out to buy presents for her.

Don’t get me wrong, I didn’t forget that promise at all. It’s just I had been racking my brain over what I should do. When, where, with who, what, and how should I buy it, heck, how the heck should I even bring it up? I was thinking through it all starting from 5W1H. I mean, it’s pretty hard being the one doing the inviting. And I was really bad with picking out dates. It was one thing deciding things on my own since that’d be a bother to the other party. But asking them instead and leaving the decision making to them made me feel uncomfortable too. What’s with this never-ending life of indecisiveness?

Whatever the case, I appreciated the fact that she was the one that brought it up. Had I postponed it any longer, I had the feeling I'd overthink things more than necessary and be on the verge of yelling "Hachika wants to go home!"[13], so I answered on the spot.

"…Then, are you free tomorrow?"

"Y-Yeah. I should be." Yuigahama had a look of shock and fiddled with her bun hair.

"I see, alright, tomorrow it is then…"

"Sure…" Yuigahama answered and then went quiet, I following suit.

And there, Komachi came over and tugged at my sleeve. "Onii-chan, Yukino-san doesn't seem to be budging from over there…"

Yuigahama jerked up her face and spoke to Komachi. "Ah, Komachi-chan, do you want to go too?"

"Huh? Go where?"

"Um, you see, I was thinking of going with Hikki tomorrow to buy Yukinon's birthday present, so…"

"Ah, that sounds nice!" said Komachi, and she made a surprised expression. Then, she formed an unnatural smile. "…Then again, I'm actually *really* busy with studying for my exams, you see."

"Th-That's true…" Yuigahama nodded. It looked like she remembered earlier that she had handed Komachi her fortune slip and that she was studying for her exams.

But after groaning a bit more, her face jerked up and she took Komachi's hands.

"B-But, hey, think of it as taking a kind of break! Besides, I bet if you give Yukinon a present, she'll be super happy, Komachi-chan! I-I also want some advice too! Or something…"

"Eh? S-Sure, I guess…… Hmm?" Komachi answered and made a puzzled look. She glanced at me.

"You might as well, Komachi. It shouldn't be a problem," I said.

Komachi tilted her head.

"Mmm… What's with this backward development…? The two of you went together alone during summer too…" Komachi grumbled in a small voice.

Well, look, a lot happened. It's just, how should I put it, we're having issues figuring out how to act with each other…

"Well, if it's for that…"

Komachi looked a little bewildered when she answered, but Yuigahama nodded happily and took out her cellphone.

“Okay, we’re settled then! I’ll send you a message later!”

Yuigahama’s phone then vibrated.

“Oh, one second,” said Yuigahama, and she took a slight distance away from us and answered her cellphone. I followed her with my eyes and it looked like she was speaking with a close friend.

But asking “who was it?” was a bit boorish. I couldn’t ask either since it made me feel like I was acting like I was someone important enough to do so.

Until Yuigahama was done with her call, we couldn’t go on ahead. So it looked like we could only wait here. Either way, as long Yukinoshita was hooked by the shooting gallery, we weren’t going anywhere anyway.

Thinking that, I looked towards the shooting range and Yukinoshita’s shoulders were lowered and walking my way.

“What’s wrong? Done already?”

I called to her and with a sad face, Yukinoshita spat out. “Yes, I’m done. Something like that is just…”

“Huh?”

I peeked at the shooting gallery again wondering what exactly happened. I looked at the stuffed toy that Yukinoshita had been fixated on the entire time and it wasn’t Pan-san the Panda, but Panda Ichiro-san the Panda[14]. Yeah, you get that sometimes at festivals like these. Instead of Natchan[15], they’d have Occhan[16], instead of Adidas, they’d have Kazides[17].

Komachi who was looking at the same stall nodded convincingly.

“Ahh, those bogus things, right?” said Komachi.

Yukinoshita placed her hand to her chin and tilted her head. “Bogus? That sounds like someone I know around here. I believe his surname was Hi, Hiki…”

“Um? You’re not referring to me, right? Then again, my name’s one thing, but you don’t even remember my family name?” I said.

Yukinoshita flicked her hair from her shoulders looking upset. “How rude, of course I remember.”

“Except you’re the one that’s rude here…”

“More importantly, where’s Yuigahama-san?”

So we’re done with my name just like that…?

“On the phone over there.”

I pointed to where she was and Yuigahama was looking around restlessly while speaking on the phone.

“Right, right. Yeah, the rock steps, I think? That’s what we went down on. Oh, I see you!”

“Ah, Yui’s over there.”

Coming over with a phone in one hand was Miura Yumiko. Even in this crowd of people, her gorgeous looking collar of fur and her bare legs that stretched out from under her mini-skirt stood out even if you didn’t like it.

And then, behind her was Ebina-san.

“Yui, Happy New Year! Happy New Year to Yukinoshita-san and you guys too!”

Unlike Miura earlier, Ebina-san talked to us. *She sure is a nice person.*

“Happy New Year.”

“Wow! Long time no see! Happy New Year!”

“Haven’t seen you since the summer, little sis!”

I returned a light greeting to Ebina-san who talked with Komachi while looking in the direction of the girl group engaged in friendly chatter.

“Miura and them, huh…” I mumbled after realizing who Yuigahama was speaking with on the phone. She turned around and nodded, overhearing what I said.

Then, coming from the rear were a few more familiar faces.

It was the blonde and loudmouthed Tobe, the thickheaded and indecisive Yamato, and the virgin opportunist Oooka. It was the New – Three for the Kill![18] trio. *But actually, Tobe’s hair is browner than it is blond…* It’s just that it was so pointless that I never really paid it any attention.

The three of them were huddled in a spot a little farther away from us.

They were making lots of noise with paper cups in one hand respectively. It looked like they were drinking amazake. Tobe squeezed his cup and gulped it all down and made a groan-like sigh afterwards.

“Sake really is somethin’. Firs’ drink of the year man, firs’ drink of the year. For real, ya’ll need to drink more.”

“Totally,” said Yamato as if flattering him. He drank the entirety of his cup and let out a satisfied sigh. Yeah, well, it’s only amazake though.

“Beeh, I’m totes drinkin’ here, seriously. It’s gettin’ me all friggin’ warmed up here. But yo, ain’t it friggin’ cold? The marathon’s seriously not gonna be good.”

“Totally.”

“Yeah, totally.”

Yeah, totally…

After Yamato and Oooka responded, I made a mental nod. Because of a turn of events in the calendar, the marathon this year was going to be held at the end of January instead of normally being held in February every year. We had to run along the seashore in the middle of this season that was getting increasingly colder.

Way to make me remember something so terrible so early in the New Year… I sent a bitter stare to the idiot trio of Tobe, Yamato, and Oooka.

It then hit me.

The three idiots of Tobe's group and Miura's pair with Ebina-san were the usual faces.

But in that lineup of people, the individual that was the center of those two groups was missing.

"Is it only them…?" I said.

Yuigahama took a step backwards and stood next to me after hearing me.

"I think they invited Hayato-kun, but it looked like it was a bad time for him."

"I imagine so." Yukinoshita replied with a nod.

Those words were surprising.

I looked in Yukinoshita's direction as did Yuigahama, Miura, and Ebina-san.

"Huh? Do you know something?" Yuigahama asked, finding it curious how self-evident Yukinoshita's tone sounded.

"Hayama-kun's family has been that kind of family since a long time ago."

"Ohhh, so that's how it is." Yuigahama made a convinced nod.

Well, Yukinoshita had always been an acquaintance of Hayama's. More accurately, a childhood friend, so it wouldn't be that odd for her to know about his family circumstances.

"…You don't say." I responded in slight disinterest while realizing again that I wasn't very knowledgeable about Yukinoshita or Hayama. No, I mean even Yuigahama didn't know all that much either.

And aside from Yuigahama and me, there were two others who reacted.

"…Hmph, oh really," said Miura with a subtle voice, as if spitting it out, and then removed her gaze from Yukinoshita. She took a few steps away from her spot, twirling her hair with her fingers, and made a bored sigh.

"Like, I'm hungry." Miura spoke briefly and walked off without paying any attention to her surroundings.

"Ah, Yumiko."

Yuigahama called out to Miura who stopped and turned around. But she was speechless and facing away. Ebina-san made a quick smile after seeing her and walked towards her.

“Okay, time for some food, huh?”

Tobe with his sharp ears caught what Ebina-san had said and approached her.

“Sup, sup? We gettin’ some food? That’d be like my firs’ meal of the year!”

There are guys like that, you know? Guys who attach “first” to everything they say when it’s the New Year. Talk about annoying…

“Ah, ummm…”

Yuigahama alternated looks between Miura’s group and our group, wondering what to do.

“You sure you shouldn’t be over there with Miura and them?”

“Um… W-What are you guys gonna do?” said Yuigahama, letting out a troubled “tahaha”.

Yukinoshita looked at her and smiled. “I should be on my way now. I’m not particularly good with crowds anyway.”

“Eh, but…”

A complicated look floated on Yuigahama’s expression from Yukinoshita’s words. Yukinoshita softly touched her shoulders, realizing her anxiety. “We’ll be able to see each other soon, won’t we?”

“Uh huh…”

I didn’t think that would actually convince her, but Yuigahama replied back quietly.

Well, it certainly wasn’t pleasant having to see Yuigahama be conflicted between Miura and Yukinoshita this early in the New Year.

There was no way we could doubt that Yuigahama’s desire to get closer was just a show of her being affectionate.

However, a friend of a friend not necessarily being a friend is common in this world in the same way having everyone being in the same space and spending the same together isn’t the best thing to do.

Yukinoshita didn’t say much, but I knew where she was coming from with her consideration. It’s because the basis for that kind of behavior was something I was very familiar with. Therefore, I already knew what I was going to do after this.

“Alright, I’ll be heading home too.”

“Eh?” Yuigahama lifted her face in surprise.

But it wasn’t something to be so surprised about.

“We only came for the shrine visit. I need to make sure Komachi gets her studying done at home too.”

“Oh, I guess so… Right.” Yuigahama nodded.

Komachi then tugged on my sleeve.

“Onii-chan, you don’t need to worry about me, so just go!”

She raised me a death flag or a survival flag or some kind of incomprehensible flag, but I ignored it. Whatever the case, the option of me joining that group didn’t exist.

“Alright, see you again.”

“See you at school.”

After Yukinoshita and I said, Komachi bowed her head in resignation.

“…Okay, see you later.”

We left the area with Yuigahama staying behind, slightly waving her hand in front of her chest. Yuigahama was probably going to go group up with Miura and the others after this.

Yuigahama’s circle of friends wasn’t just the Service Club.

I wasn’t sure whether the concept of “best friends” existed and who it was that dictated that, but I’m sure one day, there will be a day where I’ll worry over it.

I pray that concern doesn’t mentally tire me out.

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We returned to the main path of the shrine we came from originally, passed under the large archway gate, and went out onto the side of the National Route.

A freezing wind blew through the wide National Route. My body shook from the cold in response and Komachi and I adjusted our collars. On the other hand, Yukinoshita didn’t look particularly weak against the cold and adjusted only the scarf at her neck. Komachi tugged at Yukinoshita’s sleeve.

“Yukino-san, let’s go home together part of the way!”

“…I suppose.” Yukinoshita looked a little hesitant at first, but then answered with a smile. Well, there really wasn’t a need to go home separately when the direction we were going in was the same.

The street that connected from here to the station was a shopping district and because of the congestion of customers on their shrine visit, there were small stalls set up on the side of the path, the energy toe-to-toe with the interior of the temples.

Komachi and Yukinoshita talked about various things like tests and the things they did during winter break.

When we made it to the front of the station’s ticket gate, having taken our time walking up the gentle-sloping hill, Komachi made a sudden stop.

“Uh oh! D-Dang it! I totally forgot to buy a good luck charm! Shame on me! I even forgot to write on the wooden plaques too, so I’m going to dash back real fast! So, Yukino-san, I’ll be taking my leave here!”

“Ah, maybe I’ll buy a charm too,” I said.

Komachi then looked at me with half-closed eyes. “Onii-chan, what the heck are you saying? You dummy onii-trash! You nincompoop! Hachiman! It’s fine, so both of you go home first!”

“R-Right… No, wait a second. Hachiman’s not even an insult.”

I replied back, but my words didn’t reach Komachi since she had already dashed off to the distance. C’mon, you’re putting me on the spot by being so spontaneous like that.*What to do…* Since I didn’t know what to do because of Komachi, I will call this phenomenon, “What to Komachi…” Ooooh my, what to Komachi?

I turned to Yukinoshita wondering what we should do and her shoulders were trembling and her face turned away.

“What…?” I asked.

Yukinoshita let out a small sigh and readjusted her breathing. Then, as if whispering inside of her mouth, she said with a small voice, “Dummy, nincompoop, Hachiman…”

It looks like her lexicon of insults was updated with new entries… I sent her a dubious and fixated stare, and Yukinoshita played it off by clearing her throat.

“No, it’s nothing. I just thought you two really do get along.” She said with a soft smile, immediately turned forward, and went past the ticket gate. I followed after her and went up to the platform.

As always, the platform was full of people. It looked this time was around when everyone heading home from their shrine visits was at the peak.

We boarded the train upon its eventual arrival and the seats were quickly filled up, leaving us two to stand. Well, it was only about two stations. We may be tired, but we should be able to handle it for that long.

The train shook when it took off from the station. I stumbled forward from the motion and frantically grasped the straphanger.

When I did, I could feel a grabbing sensation at the end of my coat. I made a quick glance and a white, small hand was squeezing the hem.

Because of that, I put strength into my straphanger holding hand and into my staggering legs.

The vibrations of the train running, the wind tapping against the window, and the noise of the passengers filled the interior. Even so, as the train shook, the sound of faint breathing coming from my right reached my ears.

…Well, it’s crowded, and it’s shaking. It’s not a big deal.

We didn’t hold a conversation in particular despite being considerably close together, and my eyes naturally drifted to the advertisements and notices above the windows.

Amongst them, there was a route map. A sudden doubt came to mind when I looked at it.

“Oh right, are you okay with going this way?” I asked.

Yukinoshita had a blank look and tilted her head. “My home should be on the way there, so I believe this way should be fine…”

She placed her hand on her chin while speaking and checked the route map as well. Not very confident, huh? Well, “way” was kind of a vague term…

“No, I just thought since it’s the New Year and all, I was wondering what was going on with your family or something.”

“Ahh, so that’s what you meant… I’m not going home this year. I don’t have any business there in particular, and it’s quite bothersome, so…”

“I see.”

I didn’t know the exact details of Yukinoshita’s relationship with her family. I replied back, unsure of just how far of a step I could take and ask her about it.

As if the anxiety was shown on my face, Yukinoshita smiled suddenly. “It’s not that big of a deal. They have a lot to deal with during the New Year, too. If I went home, it wouldn’t be a very pleasant feeling for the both of us, so I’m just avoiding any unnecessary contact.”

“Also,” said Yukinoshita, continuing. “There isn’t that much of a big difference even if I was there.” She looked out the window, looking at the scenery that rapidly ran past us.

“No problem then, right?”

“Eh?”

Her turned expression had a slight look of surprise to it.

“If it doesn’t matter if you’re there, then that makes it easier on you. You also don’t have to worry about being a bother to anyone. After all, in this world, there are people who ruin the mood just by being there.”

“Are you perhaps introducing yourself?” Yukinoshita chuckled, showing a teasing smile.

“Right, right. That’s why, to this day, I’ve been keeping to myself as much as possible. Things stay peaceful because of my amazing consideration, so I’d like some appreciation here.”

“Consideration isn’t something that asks for a reward, you know.”

That makes sense. Tch, now it’s stuck in my head. Consideration, does not, ask for a reward. But while there may not be a reward for being considerate, there was backlash though, huh? Talk about seriously unfair.

Eventually, the train stopped.

It was the station for me to get off at. Yukinoshita was probably getting off at the next station and then onto the bus.

“Oh, this is my stop.”

“Yes.”

We had a brief exchange and I got off onto the platform.

“See you.”

I turned around looking to tell her “be careful on your way back” and it was that instant before the door closed. Facing downwards, Yukinoshita said with a quiet voice as if whispering, “…I’ll be in your care this year as well.”

Chapter 2

As always, **Yukinoshita Haruno** stirs up trouble.

I raised my eyes to the clear winter sky and running overhead was the monorail.

Standing next to me, Komachi chased it with her eyes. Then, she let out a frosty breath in exhaustion.

“Sorry for making you come along.”

“You better be.” Komachi answered with a violent snort. It was a response that was exactly like our cat, Kamakura. That’s pretty much how he’d react every time I called his name. Following the footsteps of his master, I suppose…

“Oh well, I wanted to buy a present too, so I guess it doesn’t matter,” said Komachi, another cold breath drifting. “…Besides, this might be the last time I’ll be going out with onii-chan, you know?”

“You make it sound like I’m going to die soon or something with a lonely smile like that…”

It’s like she was talking about creating a final memory for a patient with terminal illness. Put this in the theaters and there’s definitely going to be a bunch of Doraemon tears[1]. Then again, illness or not, if Komachi started to hate onii-chan, I wouldn’t be able to go on any longer…

“That’s not what I mean… I won’t be going with you again next time.” Komachi lightly glared at me, reminding me.

No, I get it myself, you know…

I understood what Komachi meant when she said “next time”. The “promise”, though I wasn’t sure if I could really call it that, was something I did make tentatively. The problem was when, where, and how to ask about it. Having no semblance of experience with going out with others had me at a loss at a time like this. Just how did everyone invite each other when going out?

Well, that’s for later.

For now, what mattered right now was today.

Yesterday, after we made it home from our shrine visit, Yuigahama sent a message regarding the present shopping.

The meeting place was in front of Chiba Station Vision. It was a very clear and understandable location. As soon as we left the station, we should easily be identifiable. The reverse was also true. While thinking that, I let out cold breaths as a faster rate.

Before long, Yuigahama made her way to us from the ticket gate. Upon noticing us, she waved her arms. “Yahallo!”

“Yeah.”

“Yui-san, yahallo to you!”

“Sorry for being late!”

Yuigahama’s beige coat fluttered hectically and she ran over to us with the sole of her boots going *pitter-patter*. As the hems of her coat fluttered, her knitted garment that went down to her lap and her skinny jeans stuck out.

“So, where are we going?”

“I was thinking we could wander around and pick something,” said Yuigahama, and she started off, pointing at things around the station.

“Let’s see, where should we start?”

Komachi followed after her and I did as well.

Chiba was a shopping paradise.

And speaking of the standard place to shop for high school students, that’d be PARCO[2].

A strong ally of youth in Chiba City; that was PARCO. It’s very likely that the fashionable PEOPLE, the YOUNG of the NOW, were warring with each other over where they should buy clothes, split between the PARCO faction and the LaLaport[3] faction. And within the PARCO faction, there should be an unsightly civil war between the Chiba PARCO group and the Tsunadanuma PARCO group.

Stop! Let’s all just get along, everyone! We’re all Chiba residents, aren’t we!? Tsudanuma’s in Narashino though!

After briefly walking, Yuigahama pointed. “Ah, let’s go with C-One[4] first!”

C-One. I know what that was. ICHIRAN’s[5] located there.

ICHIRAN utilized a system that concentrates on flavor where the store was partitioned into counter seats where you could devote yourself to your food. By the way, this system of concentrating on flavor was patented. So if we went by that theory, then that meant loners were had a built-in system of concentrating on life. Quick! I need to quickly patent that!

The C in C-One probably referred to the C in Chiba. In other words, it’s the initial C. It’s also apparent that this referred to the local hero, Captain☆C[6]. By the way, Chiba Batman[7] was not a local hero, so be careful there.

The mall which we walked and relocated to was decorated with first sale of the New Year banners and it had lines of stores. Since the mall was utilizing the area underneath a bridge, the path continued indefinitely in one direction. Due to the New Year clearance sale, the mall was bustling with activity compared to regular days.

And especially in that commotion, the girls who were in the middle of their boisterous shopping were hitting it off about stylish fashion. For the guys who had no place in that, they stood three steps, not one, away from them, feeling left on the backburner. That was me.

"Komachi-chan! Hey, look! Isn't this like super cute!?"

"Ah, you're right! You can take off the fur and match it with something else!"

"I know! You could probably use it during spring, too!"

The two picked out clothes here and there, chatting and frolicking. That's fine and all, but we're here to buy Yukinoshita's presents, right? We're not here for your own personal shopping, right?

But just watching them really gave off a girly feeling.

Yuigahama looked busy putting on the parka with the fur attachment, making twirls and turns in front of the dressing mirror.

As a guy, I just felt too conscious when going inside the store, so I decided to watch from afar.

When I did, Komachi trudged her way over to me. She looked somehow more lax than she had been recently.

"Shopping with Yui-san is so relaxing…"

"Well, yeah, if you compare her to Yukinoshita…"

When the three of us went shopping for Yuigahama's present before, I received quite the shock seeing how far off Yukinoshita was from a modern high school girl.

"Yep, going out with onii-chan really is a bummer… Well, that's one thing that makes Yukino-san super cute though! Right?" As if emphasizing that, Komachi peered into my face.

"Ohhh, right, that's the one thing that makes me not cute at all. Totally."

"Mmm, you darn hinedere[8]…"
Leave me alone.

Well, it's a bit rude to give Yukinoshita and me the same treatment.

At the very least, Yukinoshita knew exactly what fit her and she wasn't particularly indifferent to fashion. Despite that, the reason she struggled when we went shopping for Yuigahama's birthday present might've been because she wasn't used to "choosing something for others".

That honesty and awkwardness were things very typical of Yukinoshita.

The problem was what would happen when Clumsy-san received a present.

"I'm going to go check out that area for a bit."

I moved away from Yuigahama and Komachi, deciding to wander around the area. It's when you're actually looking at stuff and thinking about them that things came to mind.

A present for Yukinoshita, huh…?
I wonder what's good…

Clumsy Yukinoshita-san, in short, Clumsishita-san, but anyway, you really were putting me on the spot, Clumsinon. Aside from the things she liked, she was someone who liked practical things. Actually, her interests were pretty much that. As for reading related material, she probably had quite a bit of stuff already and since she was living alone, she probably had sufficient living necessities and cookware already. Chopping boards were standard equipment for her chest, too.

What the heck? What should I even get her…?

As I wandered around, a Destinyland store came into view.

Uhhh, Pan-san… is something she's more knowledgeable about than I am.

I went further and there was a pet shop of related goods.

Cats are… She doesn't have one… She really doesn't have one, huh? She should just get one already. I wonder if Yukinoshita's apartment didn't allow pets. I could give her a cat photo album, but she totally seemed like she'd have plenty of those…

On the other hand, I could buy something from that accessory shop over there, but I'm not sure so about that…

As I was circling around to the nearby stores and groaning, I found myself at my original position.

And there, Yuigahama was holding some clothes in her arms and looking restlessly around the area.

"Huh? Where did Komachi-chan go?"

"She wasn't with you?"

"I thought she was with you, Hikki…" Yuigahama slightly leaned forward, peered into my face, and confirmed with me.

Ahh, she did it again, that little rascal…
I knew I'd be going through the same, pointless pattern even if I called her. I mean, I was glad she tagged along, so it's not a big deal, but she could at least say something. There's something called mental preparation. *Please don't throw me out into the wild like that…*

Yuigahama looked like she was thinking for a little bit while groaning, but after readjusting the clothes in her hand again, she inclined her head as if checking with me. "I'm kinda stuck right now, so I wanted Komachi-chan to take a look… Hikki, do you mind?"

"Only if you're okay with me not being useful."

“Yeah…! No wait, you need to be useful here.”

“We’ll see.” I said.

Yuigahama then headed inside to the store to the dressing mirror. I followed after her.

“I was thinking that maybe a sweater or cardigan would be good since you can wear that over a blouse. Maybe you can use it at school too.” Yuigahama took off her coat as she spoke and then began removing the knitted garment underneath.

I felt I shouldn’t have been staring, so I averted my eyes. *Use the fitting room…* Was it because you’re wearing a shirt underneath that it’s not bothering you, huh? Because it’s bothering me, so stop it please.

There should’ve been a tune playing in the background, yet the sound of rustling clothes was unusually loud and Yuigahama’s breathing unpleasantly found its way to my ears.

“There we go… How is it?”

When she called me, I was finally able to turn around.

She was wearing a fluffy, warm looking warp knitted cardigan.

“What do you want me to say…? Well, looks good to me…”

There was no good or bad. It looked really good on her.

But the problem was that this wasn’t a present for Yuigahama, but for Yukinoshita. If Yukinoshita were to wear that cardigan, it’d definitely be kind of loose on her… Yeah, um, as for what part, I won’t say.

“But shouldn’t you consider things like Yukinoshita’s size, too?”

When choosing clothes, it was standard to wear clothes that matched your size. Also, as I was told by Komachi, your figure was important and so forth. By the way, she ran through my clothes for today a fashion heck. She criticized my selection of clothes as if saying “I’m going to step on you!”[9] No, wasn’t that just Piko? Or was it Osugi? Well, whatever.

“Size…” Yuigahama repeated that word and squeezed her stomach with her hands. “Maybe, it’s too big…”

Despair filled her face. She then moved her hand that was at her stomach area up to her upper arm and her expression grew gradually gloomier. *It’s fine! It’s fine, okay!? You’re big, but well, you’re not big! Actually, you’re not small at all!*

“Er, no, it’s fine. Actually, it looks just about right, I guess…”

They weren’t exactly supportive words, but I tried to gloss it over in a fluster. But because of my suspicious conduct, Yuigahama sent me a doubtful stare. *Ahh, jeez! What’s the correct thing to say at a time like this!?*

“Well, it looks really good on you, so I think that’s fine.”

I somehow managed to squeeze the words out.

"…Ehehe, thanks."

Finally, Yuigahama made a smile. She took off the cardigan and then excitedly began folding it. Unable to look at her directly and looking away from embarrassment, a realization struck me.

"But Yukinoshita usually follows the school rules, so she isn't going to wear that at school, right?"

Our school had school regulations even if they were still somewhat outdated. Of course, regulations on our school uniforms and school designated sweaters and cardigans existed. There weren't very many students who faithfully followed the rules to the T, so it wasn't something to worry about, but the diligent students that Yukinoshita was included in made sure to abide by those rules.

"Oh okay. That's true. Then that means…" While thinking, Yuigahama moved to the shelves with small items organized with scarves and gloves, still holding the cardigan under her arm.

As she was rummaging through those shelves, she raised her voice with an "Ah".

"So cute! This might be really fun if I use this to play with Sabure," said Yuigahama, and she grabbed a mitten that was modeled after the paws of a cat. Then, she had another mitten modeling a dog's face.

The mitten imitating a cat's paw was exactly how they looked. On the other hand, the mitten with the dog face had the face on the back of the mittens including ears, and at the thumb side was a lower jaw. Yuigahama put them on and shook her hand.

"It's kinda hard to hold stuff with these…"

"That's just how mittens are."

Yuigahama, groaning as she was thinking, lifted her face in light of something and popped opened her gripped hands.

"Take this! Nom!"

She then bit my hand with her dog mitten.

"…H-How dare you," I said, trying to play it off.

Then, Yuigahama's face became flushed red. *If you're going to get embarrassed, please don't do it next time. I'm embarrassed, too.* I gently slipped my hand away from the grasp of the mitten and fanned myself with that hand. The heating in this store was working way too well.

"Whatever, but she's not going to wear that outside because of the design, you know."

"…That's true." Yuigahama nodded convincingly.

As a matter of fact, I'm pretty sure Yukinoshita didn't openly wear those kinds of cute things apart from her normal school uniform. Would she even use what she received…? No, that's not true. I get the feeling if it's a present from Yuigahama, then she'd unexpectedly would be pretty happy internally as she put on those gloves while maintaining a composed look.

"I guess we'll have to find other stuff, huh…" Yuigahama dangled the mittens back and forth, thinking, and continued rummaging through the shelves.

"Ah, this might be good," said Yuigahama, and what she took from the shelf were socks that closely resembled the legs off a cat.

"Socks, huh? That looks pretty hard to wear with shoes, though."

"They're just indoor socks! She's obviously not going to take them out with this design."

With that logic, I'm absolutely sure she wouldn't wear those gloves from earlier either… Well, now that she mentioned it, the sole of the socks looked like it had antiskid rubber attached, resembling the pink paw of a cat.

"Since she'll be wearing it indoors, I don't think she'll need to worry about people seeing her… What do you think?"

"Well, she'll probably be happy with them."

I think Yukinoshita would probably be happy regardless of what present Yuigahama gave her. The crucial point here wasn't the item itself, but who was giving the present. In the same way, who it was that said something was more important than what was actually said.

"Okay, I'll go with this." Yuigahama put together the things in her hands and went to the register. Amongst them were the cardigan and the two mittens from earlier. *You're giving her the cat paw mittens too, huh…?*

Still, a cat's paw and a cat's leg…

Did they sell tails here too?

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Now then, I needed to do some proper searching myself. The store from earlier wasn't selling any cat tails, too.

And thus, we were here; at the Sogo[10] Chiba store of Sencity[11]. The name itself sounded like it'd be susceptible to being a fad. Then again, that's not Sencity, but sensitivity.

Typically, I'd head to the area that sold clothes for gentlemen, but today, we were here to buy Yukinoshita's present. Naturally, that would mean heading to the floor that catered to ladies.

That being said, I wasn't exactly an expert on items for women, so Yuigahama was providing me some guidance.

One of the obvious choices Yuigahama went with was a Western clothing store but others included stores that had an assortment of small, variety items.

"We can just wander around and look at random stuff, right? Like gloves, accessories, scarves… or maybe even novelty stuff…" said Yuigahama.

I entered the store to look around as well.

Since Yuigahama was giving me recommendations from nearby, for now, I wasn't getting reported by the employees and there wasn't a security officer conspicuously patrolling the area. Had I come here alone, there's no doubt an employee would've come inquire, "What could you be looking for?" stay on me the entire time while I could feel the prickly stares coming from the registers within the store. My source was when I stopped by this place by chance some time before. *I understand that it's very rare for single male customers to be around here, but um, can't you just be a little less wary of them because that would help me a lot…*

I went from a shelf to another shelf not paying any attention to the stares of the employees and Yuigahama had stopped moving. Written on the display of that shelf was "Eyewear".

What the heck was "Eyewear"? Just use glasses, jeez. Just how much of an egotist were you people needing to always use katakana for every single thing? Instead of HANGAR, just use an actual rack. There's also calling MEAT SAUCE, BOLOGNESE SAUCE and calling SPAGHETTI, PASTA, I mean, c'mon. No, wait, MEAT SAUCE and SPAGHETTI were typically in katakana anyway… How would you actually say those as Japanese words anyway…?

As I was worrying, Yuigahama tapped me on the shoulder.

When I turned around, Yuigahama had a proud look for some reason with glasses on and was pointing at herself. "Hmhm. Do I look smart or what?"

"You're already funny in the head if you're equating glasses to intelligence, you know…"

"Shaddup, you dummy," said Yuigahama, pouting. She then took one eyewear and another and checked over their designs. I did the same and grabbed one.

Ohhh, they have all sorts of them, huh?

They had different designs, but they apparently had others with various functionality, too. Descriptions accompanying them included anti-pollen, blue light cut, and so forth. Aside from the ones meant for improving your eyesight, they also had glasses developed for practical use, making them reasonably priced.

As I continued looking through the items, Yuigahama grabbed one and held it out to me. "Ah. Hikki, you should try one on. Like this one."

"Ehhh…."

This is definitely one of those situations where I get made fun of… I stood there hesitating and Yuigahama hurried me on by forcing the glasses on me.

"C'mon, hurry!"

I prepared myself and psyched myself up in order to wear the glasses. *Per… sona…!*By the way, I actually like 3 more than 4, so if I was going to be summoning something, by all means, please give me a pistol to shoot my head with![12]

"How's this?"

I put on the glasses and pushed it up by the frame with my index finger. Yuigahama then blurted out. "Totally bad!"

"Oh, shut up…"

That's why I didn't want to wear it… I took off the glasses while wincing and this time, Yuigahama gave me another pair of glasses with a different design.

"Okay, next is… this one!"

"No."

"Don't be a party pooper. Here!" said Yuigahama, pushing the glasses to me.

Arghh, how annoying… I readjusted the glasses that were stuck halfway on my ears and turned to Yuigahama to give her a piece of my mind.

When I did, Yuigahama was staring at me, mouth agape.

"……"

"Really, cat got your tongue?"

I mean, I'm the one that turned around, but no reaction of all things…? I gave her a look wondering if she had anything to say and when Yuigahama came to, she shook her hands frantically.

"Ah, no, no. It's nothing… It's just, kinda surprising how good you look with them, maybe."

"…Gee, thanks."

Getting praised made it somewhat difficult to react myself.

Still, surprising, huh?

Even if I thought I knew something, there were still a lot of things that I just didn't know. Like how Yuigahama who normally didn't wear glasses would surprisingly look good with them.

At some point long ago, there was something that Yukinoshita had once said as if out of regret. That she didn't know about Yuigahama at all.

I was the same.

The way I was before, I truly didn't even try to know.

Not just about Yukinoshita, but also about Yuigahama.

However, right now, it was just a tiny bit. It was far from understanding and I couldn't even say it was ideal, but even so, the three of us had definitely spent and accumulated time together. Slightly over half a year wasn't really all that long. But even so, compared to back then, I most certainly did know just a little more about her.

The Yukinoshita Yukino that I knew…

How Yukinoshita would be strung along by Yuigahama's pleas, how she loved cats, and how she would hug a Pan-san cushion while watching cat videos on her computer on her day offs.

Surprisingly, I knew quite a bit about her.

If Yuigahama was going to send her cat leg indoor socks, then I'll give her something to match that.

All in hopes that the time she spends on her own are as warm and comfortable as possible.

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We had been walking for a while after finishing our shopping that we took a break. In the meantime, we decided to enter a café. We could have gone to the Starbucks outside, but this season was rather cold. Also, I didn't really understand how to order there, so I didn't really want to go today.

As such, I settled for going to a place where I was familiar with making orders at.

"You okay with here?"

"Sure."

I checked with Yuigahama and we entered the café inside of Sogo. The café had a subdued atmosphere devoid of commotion due to it being further in the store.

"For two, please."

I informed the employee our party number and we were led to a seat of four. It was situated immediately next to the windows where the entirety of Chiba Station could be seen in one look below. After offering the inner seat to Yuigahama, I gazed at Chiba Station that stretched out from behind her.

I caught sight of the operating monorail and somehow, it made me think just how super advanced Chiba was. Chiba was one futuristic city, seriously.

I followed the direction in which the monorail was heading and my eyes crashed with someone who was sitting in a seat diagonally opposite of me.

"Oh, it's Hikigaya-kun."

That person was also seated at a sofa with her back to the window.

She was wearing a shirt with white based frills, a golden chain dangling at her bosom. It made her entire person glisten as if the light from outside was concentrating on her, but in reality, her cheerfully, smiling eyes looked darker than the clear skies. After adjusting her vividly, red stole that gave off an uneven impression, Yukinoshita Haruno called my name.

After calling out to me, Yuigahama shifted her gaze to the side and uttered her name in surprise. "Haruno-san… er,"

Yuigahama adjusted her gaze to the front of Haruno-san. And a male wearing a black jacket over a jersey in grey, crossed between black and white, was there. While his eyes, underneath his brown, close to a light gold, hair, looked slightly surprised, Hayama Hayato was still smiling.

"Oh, it's Hayato-kun, too."

"…Hey there." Hayama said briefly, the shine of his dull silver wristwatch escaping from out of his cuff that he lightly lifted in the air.

I returned a slight nod. We didn't say anything beyond that and the only audible noise was the faintly played jazz. Mingling with that noise was the sound of chairs being pulled.

"It sure feels like a long time since we've met, Gahama-chan," said Haruno-san, naturally relocating herself to our table.

Complying with that, Hayama let out a short sigh, took the check book, and sat next to me.

"You two on a date, huh? You little rascal, you. As friendly as ever, I see. Yukino-chan's not with you?" Haruno-san poked Yuigahama's body with her elbow and then looked towards the entrance of the store.

"Ah, we're actually here today to buy presents for Yukinon…"

"Ahh, that's right, it's almost her birthday, huh… I see, I see." Haruno-san nodded her head while listening to Yuigahama, but she then quickly took out her cellphone and started dialing somewhere.

Watching her, Hayama unassumingly spoke up. "…I don't think it'll get through."

"No, I'm sure it will today," said Haruno-san, wearing a smile full of certainty.

The ringing faintly resounded in the quiet interior of the store.

After two rings, three rings, and a few more, the call finally connected, and there was a small audible voice from the other end.

[Hello…]

"Ah, Yukino-chan? It's onee-chan. Can you come out right now?"

[I'm hanging up.]

So fast! Yuigahama and Hayama who were listening to the immediate retort made a strained smile. But Haruno-san who was seemingly used to this reaction didn't budge an inch and continued with a teasing tone.

"Ohhh? Are you sure you want to do that?"

[…What?]

Haruno-san made a broad grin.

"The thing is, right now, I'm actually with Hikigaya-kun!"

[Again with your ridiculous lies… Enough al—]

"Here you go, Hikigaya-kun."

Before she could even finish, Haruno-san forced her cellphone on me.

"Wha? Eh?"

I alternated looks between Haruno-san and the cellphone in my hand, but she started playing dumb after hiding her hands behind her. It looked like she didn't plan on answering at all. On the other hand, Yukinoshita was calling Haruno-san. *I guess I'll have to answer for now…*

"Ahh… hello?" I answered, not sure knowing what to talk about. When I did, I could hear her stifled breath from the receiver on the other end.

After a brief moment of silence, she breathed out.

[Really, unbelievable…Why are you there?]

That's what I want to ask. We were supposed to be here just to shop… Just why was I here!? Just why was I here!? Do-wa-ha-ha-ha![13] It's the yokai's fault, yes. Don't blame me, blame the yokai.

"Well, I just happened to be out shopping and she kind of caught me…"

I made a scowl at that yokai and figured I'd try to explain my situation, but I was interrupted by another sigh.

[That's fine. I'll be right over there, so switch with nee-san.]

"…Yes, I'm sorry."

I ended up apologizing for some reason.

I wiped the screen down with a wet towel and gave back Haruno-san her cellphone. She exchanged a few words with Yukinoshita about our location and the sort and hung up.

"Looks like Yukino-chan's coming," said Haruno-san, wearing a satisfied smile.

Yuigahama spoke up in hesitation. "Um, why did you call Yukinon over? It sounded like she didn't want to come…"

"Hm? Ahh, actually, we have a family dinner planned after this, but Yukino-chan refused to go. But if Hikigaya-kun and you are here, she doesn't really have any other choice, right?"

"Are we hostages or something…?"

"Don't make it sound so bad. But wouldn't it make for a great story if she rushed here for the sake of her friends who were captured on her behalf?"

"That just makes me wonder who the evil tyrant king is here…"

"Oh, we've got a Literature Boy here," said Haruno-san, teasing me gleefully.

Yuigahama titled her head with a "huh?" Hayama made a slight smile when he saw that.

"It's from 'Run, Melos!'"

"Ah, ahhh, um, yeah, that… I knew that. I've heard of that, it's like super fast!"

Does she really get it…? “Melos ran… Melos and Selinuntius… are best friends forever…!!”[14] was basically what it was.

As I doubted her, Yuigahama frantically changed the topic to play it off. “Anyway, having a family dinner sounds nice! Everyone’s together and stuff…”

Yuigahama directed her gaze to Hayama. Guessing what that meant, Hayama picked up where she left off.

“Our parents have been pretty close since a long time ago… When we were talking about making New Year greetings, they started talking about having dinner together. They’re just having me accompany them.”

“Ohh…” Yuigahama nodded convincingly.

Haruno-san traced the rim of her cup and let out a small sigh. “Our family and relatives don’t really have it easy on New Year’s Day and the day before the fourth[15] when work begins again is pretty hectic too. So the day we can make courtesy calls with acquaintances is just today.”

Apparently, it’s an established custom for the Yukinoshita household. But still, if they’re going out to eat after this, then that meant Yukinoshita’s parents should be nearby… *I kind of want to see them.*

I did a light stretch and took quick looks around. But sitting diagonally opposite of me, Haruno-san chuckled, easily seeing through that sneaky behavior.

“Our parents are making courtesy calls right now. We’re just waiting for them.”

“Ahh, I see…”

I accepted it after being told. Whenever fellow parents had business to take care of, they typically left their children together. Back when my mom participated in a co-op society, since it was a gathering of other moms, she would leave me with their kids. But look here, maman. Parents may get along together, but more often than not, the kids didn’t… It was truly an awkward period of my life.

Listening, Yuigahama let out a fascinated gasp. “Making those greetings must be rough, huh?”

“We do it every year, so I’m already used to it. Well, I do think it’s a pain sometimes though… It’s surprising how this custom’s still alive, tradition rather,” said Haruno-san, her voice having some indescribable feeling of resignation.

There was something called an association, whether it had to do with Yukinoshita or even Hayama who didn’t make it to the shrine visit.

Respectable families, the so-called distinguished families, probably had their obligations. For common people, it’s a story that didn’t seem all that real, but the fact of the matter was that it was. Well, a household with secretive relative associations wasn’t all that rare. It’s just that I didn’t know too much about it, but surprisingly, I think there were a lot of households with unique communities.

Even common people like ourselves had one or two things that shadowed over us. If you factor in social standing, then the obligations should increase accordingly.

Haruno-san tapped the table as if to brush off the sigh she let out. “Anyway, what kind of present did you buy?”

As Haruno-san was speaking, she sidled over to Yuigahama who was sitting on the same sofa. Yuigahama shrunk back while opening up her bag.

“Um… I got her indoor socks…”

“Ohh, the floor can get pretty cold this time of the year.”

“I know! So, like, the last time I went to Yukinon’s place, I thought maybe the floor’s just a little cold, see.”

“Oh, I totally get you. I’m not too good with the cold myself.”

In contrast to their girly chat, the guys, Hayama and me, had nothing in particular to talk about and just sat there listening to them.

But to Hayama, it looked like that wasn’t something he could sit still to and he murmured with a small voice.

“Birthday present, huh…?” Hayama glanced at me. “What did you buy?”

“Ahh, just some stuff.”

“I see.” Hayama averted his gaze, not pressing me any further.

From thereon, Hayama lent his ear to Haruno-san and Yuigahama’s conversation, occasionally responding. At the wrist of Hayama’s hand that held his cup, the second hand of his watch slowly ticked.

All I did was follow it with my eyes.

The hand turned and turned as it was dictated to, going at the same rhythm indefinitely without breaking its pace. It would make one revolution, then a second one, and return to its original place, taking a similar appearance as always. But even so, it would never, ever look the same. While the second hand of the clock would stay as it is without changing, the time that represented the surroundings would.

Suddenly, Haruno-san who had been looking at the present wrapping spoke. “It’s been a while, but maybe I’ll give her something too.” Her gaze then moved over. “Right, Hayato?”

“…Right.”

Hayama lightly shrugged his shoulders and moved his gaze to outside the window. Ahead of his gaze were the lights of the city—then again, likely not.

I looked at the mirror with Hayama’s reflection and unexpectedly, all I was thinking about was what it was exactly that he had given her a long time ago.

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The stagnant time carried on.

Thirty minutes had passed since Haruno-san's phone call to Yukinoshita. It should take a bit more time if she was coming here straight from her apartment. Having been the ones who called her, there was no way we could just get up and leave.

The coffee I sipped at had long been empty and the teapot that should've had steam rising from its top was already cold.

Yuigahama, aside from me, was also restlessly turning her head. She then raised her voice after recognizing something. I looked in its direction and I discovered Yukinoshita briskly walking in our direction.

"Yukinooon, over here," said Yuigahama, waving her hand.

Yukinoshita noticed her and she made her way to where we were sitting.

"Yuigahama-san… you were here too," said Yukinoshita, surprised. We didn't mention her on the phone, after all.

"Right, right. Um… I was out shopping with Hikki and I somehow got caught too…"

"Shopping… I-I see…"

Unsure of whether she should reveal that we were here to shop for her presents or not, Yuigahama suspiciously stumbled over her words. Yukinoshita made alternating dubious looks between Yuigahama and me as she was listening.

"Anyway, sit, sit," said Yuigahama. She lifted herself up half-way, making space for another person on the sofa and invited Yukinoshita to sit there.

Inevitably, Yukinoshita sat at a position where she didn't face Haruno-san directly. She then bowed her head to Yuigahama. "I'm sorry that my older sister was a bother to you."

"Oh no, not at all." Yuigahama answered, cheerfully waving her hands back and forth.

Yukinoshita pressed her hand against her chest looking slightly relieved. Then, she turned to me and checked to see how I was doing with an upward glance.

"Hikigaya-kun too, um…"

"It's not a big deal. I had nothing better to do anyway."

I really didn't have anything planned after we were done shopping. In fact, I might've felt relieved for the time I wasn't alone together with Yuigahama. That being said, I couldn't say that was a good thing at all.

And the main culprit behind that was wearing a provocative smile and she teasingly greeted Yukinoshita.

"Yukino-chan, you're sooooo slow."

“You have a lot of nerve calling me on short notice…”

Yukinoshita gave her a sidelong glare while Haruno-san took it coolly. Yuigahama who was stuck in between had an uneasy smile. Super Smash Yukinoshita Sisters! Please spare me from that…

“Why not leave it at that? It looks like Yukino-chan rushed over here as fast as she could so, so…”

It was a refreshing and recognizable voice that tried to alleviate the tense mood. Because I wasn’t familiar with that voice calling her that way, I reflexively turned my head. The owner of the voice, Hayama Hayato, had a blunder-making grimace and quickly tried to cover it up with a smile.

“……”

Yukinoshita looked at Hayama quietly, seemingly surprised, and he shook his shoulders.

“Yukinoshita-san, what would you like to drink?”

“…I’ll take black tea then.”

After she stated, he promptly made the order. After the black tea arrived, Haruno-san made a deep, long breath.

“It’s been a long time since we all got together for tea like this, huh?”

“That’s true.”

“……”

While Hayama answered and nodded in agreement, Yukinoshita kept her eyes closed with her cup in hand. When the chat stagnated, Yuigahama spoke up trying to find something to talk about.

“Ah, ummm… Hayato-kun has known you two since a long time ago, after all.”

“Yep, yep. You know how Hayato’s an only child? Thanks to that, his parents were really affectionate with us. Right, Yukino-chan?”

“I don’t really think so.”

“That’s not true. It wasn’t just our parents that were affectionate with you two. Everyone else was too.”

Even when Haruno-san spoke to them and even when Hayama maintained his smile and answered, Yukinoshita’s attitude didn’t change. But Haruno-san didn’t pay that any attention and her gaze turned distant.

“It’s so nostalgic… Back when we were younger, whenever our parents had business to take care of, I’d always be the one taking care of you two.”

Hearing that, Yukinoshita twitched and frowned. “You must be mistaken with forcing us to follow you around and do what you want. You were a real nuisance.”

She set her cup on her saucer and sent a cold tone and indifferent gaze to Haruno-san. Hayama responded in turn.

“Ahh, like the time when we were at the public zoo… We went through a lot of trouble at the amusement park zone, didn’t we…?”

“It was like that at the Rinkai Park, too. She’d leave us stranded, she’d rock the Ferris wheel…”

Hayama and Yukinoshita made gloomy expressions from recalling the days of the past. But Haruno-san was nodding with a happy look.

“Ahh, that happened, didn’t it? And Yukino-chan would always cry afterwards.”

“Wait… Stop making up things.”

“But they’re not made up though. Right, Hayato?”

“Ahaha… I wonder.”

Haruno-san would talk to them, Hayama would smile and respond, and Yukinoshita would nod silently.

As I watched them engaged in their nostalgic chatter, a feeling of reality suddenly sank in.

Those three certainly had accumulated time together back then and they were memories that outsiders could not touch on.

Yuigahama couldn’t join in on their conversation, let alone me.

I don’t know what kind of relation these two sisters had a long time ago. Even if I knew, there was nothing I could do.

The only things I could do were occasionally carry the bitter coffer to my mouth and ignore their stories of the past that continued even and respond agreeably. And lastly, imagine them.

I don’t know when it was, but I was asked something before.

That if I had went to the same elementary school as those two girls, would anything have changed.

Just what did I answer at the time?

As I indulged in my memories and thoughts, there was the simultaneous sound of a sigh and a placed cup. I looked in its direction and Haruno-san was resting her chin in her hands, gazing at Hayama and Yukinoshita with eyes lacking warmth.

“Both of you were sooo adorable back then… Nowadays… you two just seem so boring.”

The more beautiful her nicely shaped, vivid lips were, the colder the words that came out of them. With a pinning glare and an icy smile, the voices of everyone there were stifled.

Yukinoshita slightly squeezed her fist above the table while Hayama gritted his teeth and looked away. Yuigahama made a perplexed glance at me.

When the table submerged in silence, Haruno-san chuckled. “Well, Hikigaya-kun’s here now. I guess I’ll just settle for playing with Hikigaya-kun instead.”

“No, anything sports related is a bit too much for me…”

“But that’s exactly what I want to tease you in. There, there. There, there, Hachiman,” said Haruno-san, and she reached out her hand to rub my head. I twisted my body and avoided her hand. “Oh, he got away.”

The way she would speak with her friendly smile made her appear like a good-natured older sister. Not often did you get to have an older beauty smile at you, so it wasn’t a bad feeling. Even if that smile was a lie it might’ve not mattered. Anyone could have a two-faced façade in the same way Isshiki Iroha would try to appear cute, so it wasn’t scary in the least.

How Yukinoshita Haruno would expose that unknown nature of hers hidden underneath was what was frightening.

But Haruno-san at the moment didn’t seem like she’d be saying any more and brought up a completely different topic with her smile intact.

“Speaking of sports, isn’t there a marathon at school coming up soon?”

“Ah, yes. I think it’s at the end of the month.” Yuigahama answered.

Haruno-san showed a look of surprise. “Ohh, so it’s not being held in February this year.”

“According to the advisors, it sounds like they’re moving it ahead of schedule to match up with the calendar.” Hayama exchanged a gentle smile as if nothing had happened and replied with a calm voice.

And there, Yukinoshita-san was making quite the depressing face, of course. *She has no stamina, after all… She didn’t look like she’d be good with marathons.*

In any case, the cheerful mood returned.

That’s fine, but the four of them engaged in pleasant chatter somehow attracted attention from their surroundings. They weren’t gaudy in the least, but they had presence.*These four sure do stand out, huh…*

For a while now, I could feel glances directed at us from the entrance of the store.

Well, it was a little bit noisy right now, but these four were attractive people. They were the kind of people you’d end up looking at if they were walking in the middle of the city.

Thanks to these four, my presence became even more nonexistent. I am a shadow… But the stronger the light, the darker the shadow, the more prominent the shine of the light becomes…[16]

Since I had nothing to do in particular, I decided to devote myself to being Kuroko, a stagehand. But still, it's abnormal how that sounded like Kuroyanagi Tetsuko[17] instead.

I sat there carrying my coffee to my mouth mechanically without joining in the conversation and my coffee was all gone. *Might as well get one more…* When I looked for a waiter inside the store, a woman in a kimono was heading our way.

Put up black, glossy hair and a demeanor of tranquility. She seemed younger than my parents. She walked with a noiseless and graceful gait, balancing her well-proportioned body. Her unassuming countenance gave rise to a feeling of déjà vu.

She looks similar, intuitively, I thought.

That woman made her way to our table without hesitation and called out.

"Haruno."

It was a voice that traveled easily, making it through all the voices of the customers and the lightly played BGM and attracting the attention of those who listened. It caused me to think of someone.

Haruno-san turned around after being called.

"Ah, did you finish your business?"

"Yes. I came here to call you two since we're going to have a meal after this. Hayato-kun, I'm sorry for making you wait."

"Not at all, please don't worry about it. We were able to pass the time thanks to everyone here." Hayama answered in a friendly manner.

Then, he faced us and the woman moved her gaze around as well.

Yukinoshita's presence must've been rather unexpected. She muttered an "Oh my" with a lively voice. She then wore a gentle smile.

"Yukino, so you did come. I'm glad…"

"Mother…" Yukinoshita muttered, either in surprise or in dejection.

Speaking of which, her appearance and her displayed demeanor was remarkably similar to Yukinoshita. Once she got older, they'd be two peas in a pod. Yet, the reason why I didn't notice that on first glance was because there was a forceful intensity. She had a dignity that caused me to think twice before trying to speak to her casually. I instinctively straightened my back.

Yukinoshita gulped, gently touched her elbows, embraced her own body, and averted her gaze as if she didn't belong.

Just how did her daughter look to her? Yukinoshita's mother expressed a gentle smile.

Next to Yukinoshita who had lost her words, Yuigahama slipped out her words. “Woow, she’s crazy beautiful…”

While Yuigahama was surprised, Yukinoshita’s mother gave us a light bow and asked Haruno-san. “Haruno. Are they your friends?”

“Yep. Hachiman and Gahama-chan.” Haruno-san introduced us considerably crudely, either because she was continuing on from her charade from earlier or she found it too bothersome to explain.

“Ah, I’m Yukinon’s friend, Yuigahama Yui.”

Yuigahama bowed her head in a fluster and I nodded in succession. *But having to introduce myself to a girl’s parents made me a little nervous…* I thought, but as I was hesitating to name myself, it looked like what Yuigahama had said drew Yukinoshita’s mother’s attention.

“Yukinon…” Yukinoshita’s mother gently placed her hand to her chin and narrowed her eyes, alternating looks between Yukinoshita and Yuigahama.

“Oh my, my apologies, so you were Yukino’s friend. You looked rather mature that I just assumed.”

“Mature… Ehehe.”

Yuigahama looked pleased about it, but those words gave me a slight feeling of discomfort.

If I had to say, Yuigahama’s looks were on the side of childish and innocent. At the very least, her behavior and gestures didn’t give the impression of someone cool and collected.

But apparently making a trivial mistaken assumption, Yukinoshita’s mother placed her hand to her cheeks and happily spoke to Yuigahama. “Oh, is that so… Hayato-kun’s the only one I know amongst Yukino’s classmates, so… Please get along with her from now on, okay?”

“Yes!”

Yuigahama vigorously answered back and Yukinoshita’s mother lightly lowered her head. I missed the timing to name myself, but well, it looked like she didn’t have any interest in me at all and I doubt we’d ever meet again, so I didn’t mind it. She then turned to Haruno-san and Hayama.

“Well then, shall we get going?”

“Okaaaay.”

Haruno-san stood up and Hayama followed suit after taking the checkbook in his hand. But Yukinoshita, who was sitting in front of me, didn’t move.

Seeing that, Yukinoshita’s mother calmly asked. “Yukino, you’re coming along as well, right?”

It was a question, but at the same time, it wasn’t. Packed in that short sentence were all sorts of implications.

“I…” Yukinoshita spoke hesitantly.

Her mother added to her words as if imploring her. “We’re also celebrating your birthday.”

It was an affectionate, warm gaze and a gentle, reprimanding tone. Yet, in them was a powerful force of compulsion.

“……”

Yukinoshita bit her lips, faced downwards, and peeked a glance in my direction. *Uh, even if you look at me…*

Haruno-san caught that. “Yukino-chan, you can’t.”

Feelings of amusement shook in those cold eyes. With a vicious smile, Haruno-san spoke with a severe tone wearing a vicious smile and Yukinoshita’s shoulders jumped.

A moment of silence continued briefly.

Haruno-san continued watching Yukinoshita while Hayama looked at the two anxiously. Yuigahama shrunk back as if feeling out of place. I set my gaze outside the window and let out a weak sigh pretending not to notice.

In that time, no words were exchanged and the somehow uncomfortable period of time continued on.

It wasn't just for me.

But also for Yuigahama. And also for Yukinoshita.

Or possibly, everyone there might've felt the same way.

Yukinoshita's mother tilted her head wondering what to do and placed her hand on her temple. She then glanced at the two of us.

"I know, by all means, your friends can join us… What do you think?" Yukinoshita's mother smiled at Yuigahama and me.

"I'm sorry. I don't want to overstay my welcome…" I answered and rose. With an attendance of complete relatives, it would've been too awkward to be there.

More importantly, I wasn't that dense that I would overlook a simple sign like this.

"I see. I thought perhaps you could have joined us…" She said, not looking to stop us as obvious as that should've been.

"…Well, we'll be taking our leave here."

"E-Excuse us."

Yuigahama lowered her head, I lightly nodded, and we left our seats. Hayama exchanged a brief goodbye, "See you later" and Haruno-san waved at us with a smile.

Yukinoshita stood up right after us and sent a casual look to her mother. Her mother slightly pulled back her chin and nodded back.

When Yukinoshita followed us to the front of the store to send us off, she hung her face.

"…I'm sorry you needed to be considerate for me," said Yukinoshita, apologetically.

Yuigahama shook her hands back and forth. "No problem! I mean, I feel like we got something good out of it since we got to see Yukinon's mom!"

"I see. Then that's fine…" Yukinoshita answered, but her lifted face was still gloomy.

Yuigahama's face clouded when she saw that. But she promptly thought of something and began rustling through the bags under her arm.

“Ah. I know, here. It’s a bit early, but this is for your birthday tomorrow.” Yuigahama handed her the bag with presents to Yukinoshita. Since Yuigahama was giving it to her now, I decided to do the same.

“Congrats.”

“Th-Thank you…” Yukinoshita had a look of confusion, stiffly staring at the bags, but eventually spoke with a disconnected voice. Then, she embraced the bags at her chest and her face broke into a smile.

Watching Yukinoshita, Yuigahama slipped a smile out as well. “Let’s celebrate your birthday again at school!”

“Alright, see you later.”

“Yes… See you later.”

After we bid farewell to Yukinoshita who was slightly waving her half-open hand, we headed to the elevator.

I pressed the button of the elevator to head down, but it was going to take some time before it made it up to our floor. While waiting. Yuigahama let out a moved gasp.

“So that’s Yukinon’s mom, huh? They really do look alike.”

“…I guess so.”

True, Yukinoshita did resemble her mother. At the very least, I think their outward appearances and surface demeanor were very alike. But on a more intuitive level, she was closer to Haruno-san. I felt like I could understand what Haruno-san had said about her mother back then a little.

“…But, it’s like,”

When Yuigahama began to speak, wondering whether to say or not say, the sound of the elevator went off and the door opened.

We both went inside, I pressed the button to the first floor, and Yuigahama spoke up again. It was likely a different matter from earlier.

“Then again, I guess Hayato-kun and Yukinon really are childhood friends, huh? I mean, I did hear about it at some point.”

“What do you mean by ‘really’? It’s not like they were lying.”

“I know that. They just didn’t give off that vibe. If they knew each other from back then, I think it’d be okay if they talked to each other a bit more.”

“People have their own circumstances, right? Just because you go to the same school as someone doesn’t mean you’ll talk to him.”

“Mmm, I guess so.”

The past is an inviolable domain for only those who are concerned. Beautiful and warm memories aren't the only ones that existed there; so do unsightly and cold ones.

It's by having that past that the gap between those memories becomes larger when a discontinuity forms. Accumulating them together is separate from accumulating them individually. While the heights of the accumulation may be the same, they are different peaks that lead to different summits. That difference can change a lot of things. Positions, environments, and even the way someone's name is called.

The elevator continued down without making any stops.

In the silence, only the low sounds of motion reached my ears. Our legs shook slightly in response to the vibrations.

And down and down we went, just plunging deeper and deeper, silently.

The moment when the elevator stopped and we arrived at our floor, I felt looking at the scenery beyond the opened door to be slightly frightening.

Chapter 3

At some point, **Isshiki Iroha** makes herself at home.

The end of the first three days of January also meant the end of the New Year holiday craze.

My parents who were lounging around immediately returned to their busy schedule when work resumed and Komachi finally shifted into serious mode for her exams.

As such, with nothing to do at home, Kamakura and I spent our days in comfortable lethargy.

But the peaceful passage of time doesn't mean your mind is at peace. A person becomes more anxious the longer they spend time doing nothing. To be busy is to devote your full attention to something while everything else stays outside the span of your attention. It's when you have free time that you find yourself thinking about the aimless future. You then fall into depression. *Ahhh, I really don't want to go to school or work…*

Especially during this limited winter break, you were easily susceptible to these kinds of thoughts.

You're reminded that this time of emptiness and permissible idleness will eventually come to an end. To us, we know by heart that this amiable period of time won't continue on forever.

Time will mindlessly go on, placing a strong, mental burden on an individual in order to make apparent that there is a definite end. *I wonder if this is how NEETs feel when they realize their parents they were so dependent on have gotten old…* I thought at the kotatsu, patting the belly of my cat.

But it was by surpassing that burden that made you a true warrior. A true, unemployed warrior. The people who say "it's time to get serious" for the first time after being cornered were unemployed people and light novel authors. It came to reason that being unemployed equated to being a light novel author. Q.E.D.[1] Or Spirals: The Bonds of Reasoning[2] instead.

I was stuck with those thoughts and once I realized it, it had already become the END OF VACATION[3].

School would be starting today henceforth.

But due to the messy rhythm of my life, I was met with a hectic morning.

As I washed my face, I roughly combed my unkempt hair and looked into the mirror. My sleepiness was blown away by the chilly morning and the freezing water.

Alright… Let's do my best today, too.[4]

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The classes following the end of winter break were enveloped in an unruly atmosphere.

My classmates who exchanged greetings like "Long time no see" and "Happy New Year!" somehow looked restless. It's likely because they had plenty to talk about from over winter break. Everyone was clamorous and imbued with energy far different from the usual. It might've been because it's been a long time since they had spoken, the New Year, and the exciting air that was especially unique at the beginning of a new semester.

However, those reasons were likely not the only ones.

The scrap of paper that was passed out to us during the morning short home room (SHR) was one of the causes.

My eyes were fixated on that paper as the words of the homeroom teacher went in one ear and out the other. Written on the paper was "Prospective Career Path Questionnaire". This had been given out several times before, but this was apparently the last one of our second year. Our third year electives for humanities and sciences would be officialized according to this sheet.

Whether we liked it or not, it made us aware that our time as second year high school students would end.

The year had changed and what remained of the time we could spend in this class was little. The year gradually marched on and we could feel the passage of time becoming faster. I'm sure I wasn't the only one.

We were a week into January and there was only a little left of this school year. The time we could spend in class was just short of three months.

The main school events were done and anything after January somehow felt like a throwaway period. No goal to head to meant having no events to hold. But going away along with that was the awareness towards friendly people in the surroundings, leading to the current commotion.

Moreover, once we were third years, we wouldn't attend school starting from January and on to prepare for exams. So in reality, this winter was the last winter of our high school life.

You're reminded that this time of emptiness and permissible idleness will eventually come to an end. To us, we know by heart that this amiable period of time won't continue on forever.

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The noisy atmosphere saw no change even after school.

There were still an abundance of students left in the classroom seemingly because they weren't satisfied with their talking yet. Conspicuous amongst them was the group that revolved around Hayama Hayato and Miura Yumiko.

Tobe, Oooka, and Yamato were engaged in their typical idiotic conversation while Hayama was looking out the window with his chins in his hand. Occasionally, he would respond as needed to the three of them in light of something with a smile.

Their immediate neighbors, Miura and the others, were apparently engaged in another discussion.

Miura was sluggishly twirling her blonde hair with her fingertips like always and was slumped against the back of her chair. She was glaring at the Prospective Career Path Questionnaire in one hand.

"Yui, what are you gonna go with?" Miura asked Yuigahama, who was diagonally opposite of her, while flapping the sheet of paper.

"I'm… probably gonna go with humanities, maybe."

"Ohh. Ebina, you?"

"I'm doing the same thing. What about you, Yumiko?"

"I'm… still thinking."

Ebina-san, sitting in front of Miura, answered as she was adjusting her glasses. Miura replied back and glanced to her side.

In that direction was Hayama's group.

Miura paused to think as she was watching them and called out. "…Tobe, what are you gonna do?"

Tobe turned around after he was suddenly brought up and he tilted his head, not knowing what she was talking about. But it looked like he perceived the situation after seeing the paper in Miura's hand.

"Ahh, my career path, ehh? Nah, I'm still figurin' out what to do, but I do suck at memorizin' stuff. I might go with the sciences."

"Huuuh?"

"Wha, unexpected."

Miura cocked her head in a degenerate way, ridiculing him and Yuigahama was surprised. Well, it certainly was unexpected. For the most part, Tobe didn't look like the type of person who could sit through a science curriculum. I wasn't the only one who thought that as Oooka and Yamato nearby checked with his sanity.

"Sciences? You serious?"

"Calm yourself."

It looked like even Tobe didn't take their remarks too kindly. His mouth distorted and he argued back.

“Whaddya want me to do? Rememberin’ English vocab is like playin’ a game on steroids.”

No, no, English is necessary for both the humanities and the sciences, you know…

Oooka and Yamato looked relieved that Tobe didn’t put into any thought on deciding, joined their shoulders together, and spoke close to his ears.

“Let’s go with the humanities together, eh? Yeah?”

“Getting credits in the sciences at college is pretty hard, dude.”

“Yeah, yeah, listen to Yamato. College humanities are easy peasy, so we can hang out all the time, you know? We can only really hang out while we’re still students, so we gotta think about the future!”

It looked like Oooka and Yamato chose their career paths, thinking about how to postpone working full-time instead of continuing their education. Still, was this guy really saying to think about the future in that sense?

People who typically say those things tend to lecture kids with a self-satisfied look only after they started working later on. They’d default to “You’ll end up regretting not studying more as a student, you know?”

Fuhaha! Those people should just agonize over their job hunting days! They should just stick to climbing Mt. Fuji as fast as possible just so they could have a story to tell at a job interview. On the other hand, I had no desire to work, so it’s possible the quality of my soul might be lower than theirs.

But to Tobe, that persuasion was super effective[5]!

“Ohh, that works too. That’d save me some trouble, for real.” Tobe was ensnared instantly. Tobe’s future blacked out[6]!

But it looked like even Tobe had concerns about his career path, so he asked the others. “What’s everyone else doin’?”

“Hina and I are probably doing humanities. And Yumiko’s still thinking,” said Yuigahama.

Tobe flicked up his nape hair and glanced at Ebina-san to see what she was doing.

“Ohh, serious. Maybe I’ll hit up the humanities, too.”

“But they do say the sciences have better job prospects. So I think the sciences are good. You can multiply the chemical elements of the Periodic Table[7], too.”

Ebina-san was speaking seriously at first, but towards the end, she was making her rotten “gufufu” laugh.

“…Ah, ahh, that makes sense. Th-That works, too. Yeah, yeah, totally.”

No. No, it doesn’t. Tobe, however, was nodding his while recoiling back. As usual, Ebina-san’s protective barrier was standing strong as ever.

What made things different from than normal was how everyone else reacted. The person that would typically keep Ebina-san from going out of control by knocking her on the head wasn't doing anything today. Finding that odd, Ebina-san turned her gaze to Miura.

Miura was absentmindedly looking in Hayama's direction, not paying any attention to what Tobe and the others were discussing.

"…How about you, Hayato?" Miura asked Hayama who had been watching over them the entire time without participating.

He lightly shrugged his shoulders and made a wry smile. "I… do have something in mind for now."

"Hmmm…"

Miura responded listlessly and averted her eyes from Hayama. Unlike her attitude, her face indicated she still wanted to ask more. However, Hayama ended the conversation on that note with just a smile. With a smile like that, it looked like Miura couldn't ask any further and lost her words. When the conversation halted between the two, Tobe barged in.

"Ya know, Hayato-kun, couldn't ya tell us which one? I dunno which to pick."

"What're you going to do after hearing mine? You'll regret it if you don't think about it seriously."

Hayama's words were sound.

I don't have any intention of saying something aggrandizing as "decide your things by yourself". When you come up with an answer that conforms to someone else's answer and it doesn't go well, you'll always end up blaming that person. You'll become desperate to look for the criminal of your life. Even though you're the one with the conformist answer, you'll hold a grudge towards that person. An attitude of compromise and deception is undoubtedly dishonesty.

Tobe went "ehh", "ughh", and "weeey" from Hayama's lecture, but was somehow convinced.

"Well shucks, guess I'll think about it harder." Tobe mumbled. The others nodded and that was the end of that conversation.

Running out of common things to discuss, a brief moment of silence fell over them

Oooka spoke up out of tact as if remembering something and spoke to Hayama. "Speaking of which, Hayato-kun, are you seriously dating Yukinoshita-san?"

"Huh?"

Everyone including Miura had their mouths opened in dumbfounded amazement. My mouth might've been open, too. What are you blabbering about all

of a sudden, Oooka?*There's no way that's true, I think… It… shouldn't be, right? Yeah… it shouldn't be…*

When Oooka threw the unexpected curve ball at them, time was stopped for everyone. But the time still continued on.

"Huuuuuuuh!?" Miura noisily stood up from her seat.

My classmates who were chatting noisily directed their gazes towards them in curiosity. The classroom was suddenly enveloped in silence.

With everyone's attention concentrated on them, Hayama glared at Oooka. "Who's saying something irresponsible like that?"

The voice he wrung out was sharp.

Hayama emitted an aura that was separate from his typical one and Oooka lost his words in astonishment. Hayama's gaze, however, wouldn't allow for even silence.

Hayama's expression was something I had seen before. It was back during late autumn when we were with Orimoto and her friend.

Pressured by the glint in Hayama's eyes that didn't waver, Oooka answered his question in a fluster.

"Nah, it's more like a rumor… Something about you two being seen together over winter break or something…" said Oooka, barely managing to answer.

Hayama let out a short sigh, lowered the corner of his eyes, and curved his mouth upwards. "Oh, is that it? Sorry, but it's not that fun of a story. We only met because of family business. Besides, there's no way that's true. Right, Tobe?"

With his typical smile, Hayama patted Oooka's shoulders and asked Tobe with a bright voice.

"Ah…. Ahh, totally! Yeah, totally!"

"Right?"

When a self-deprecating smile was directed to them, Oooka and Yamato agreed.

"Y-Yeah, that's true! Nahh, I totally thought it was baloney!"

"Then just say so." Hayama jokingly poked Oooka in the head.

No matter how you looked at it, it was a conversation between boys. After getting poked, Oooka played it off and the classroom gradually grew lax.

Hayama picked up his bag and stood up.

"We should get going to club. I'll head over once I turn in my questionnaire to the faculty's office."

"Alrightyy."

“Okay, we should get going too.”

Unanimously cheering, Tobe followed by Oooka and Yamato stood up, lightly waved to Miura and the others with a “see ya”, and walked off.

Miura watched them leave from behind quietly. She slightly bit her lips and continued twirling her long hair with her fingertips without moving.

Yuigahama gently placed her hands on her shoulders. “It’s okay, don’t worry. Um, I was there, too.”

“You’re kidding?” Miura asked anxiously.

Yuigahama smiled. “Nope. I was shopping on that day and then I met with Yukinon’s onee-chan, and so like, Yukinon’s family and Hayato-kun’s family are acquaintances, so it was like a New Year greeting kind of thing. So, Yukinon was called to that too.”

That’s a terrible explanation… It’s like listening to a child speaking…

Ebina-san nodded her head to the crude explanation and summed it up. “I see. So they met up because of family business and then someone happened to see them and that turned into a rumor.”

“Uh huh, probably.”

“It’s because Hayato-kun and Yukinoshita-san stand out a lot, so it’s easy for them to leave an impression on people.”

After eavesdropping on their conversation up to that point, I stood up from my seat and left the classroom.

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The commotion after school propagated to the hallways as well.

The school had just resumed from winter break and the premises were still somewhat restless. The usually empty hallway that led to the special building saw some student traffic.

“Did you hear? The thing about Hayama-kun.”

“Ahh, that. Sounds totally real, doesn’t it?”

The girls that passed by me gossiped about the things they had apparently just learned moments ago.

Just like Ebina-san had said in the classroom, it’s likely pieces of information were strung together, turned into a story with some guesswork, evolved into a trend of fun, and dispersed.

It wasn’t even a story that involved me at all, but a discomfort crawled up my neck that made me want to duck my head in as I was listening to the gossip.

That discomfort was likely due to the revolting nature of the people whose names I didn’t even know were gossiping things as they pleased.

The problematic point with gossip like this has to do with the fact they aren't necessarily speckled with bad will from one person to another.

It's because it's funny, it's because everyone's interested, and it's because it's about the two that stood out. That's why it's okay to say anything about them. No one questions that explanation and it becomes the topic of the day. They irresponsibly propagate mistaken information without authenticating it. Regardless of how much trouble it causes for someone, they can pardon themselves of responsibility with "it's just a rumor". They're the ones that stay out of the spotlight, yet when the situation doesn't go in their favor, they don't hesitate to blurt out that they're just an average citizen of the masses.

Just the thought of that was completely sickening. If that's how things were going to be, it's a lot better to just overhear people insult you from behind your back.

While I indulged myself in those thoughts, I could hear the sounds of patting footsteps coming after me. The only one who walked this lively was Yuigahama. I relaxed my pace and Yuigahama quickly caught up.

Yuigahama lined up next to me and hit my waist with her bag. "Why are you going on ahead without me?"

"Well, it looked like you were still talking…"

First of all, I don't recall promising to go to club together with you… Well, there was that promise in December to go to club together. This must've been a continuation of that for Yuigahama.

"Hey, did you hear the talk earlier? You know, the thing about Yukinon and Hayato-kun."

"Well, you guys were pretty loud…"

Not only was her group noticeable as it is, Miura even yelled out… Wasn't everyone that was still left in class watching at the time?

"Well, a rumor's a rumor. There's just no way."

"I think so too, but…" Yuigahama stopped her words for a moment and quickly lifted her face. "But I was just wondering that maybe that might be true for Yukinon someday. Hayato-kun, too."

I tried imagining it, but a proper image just didn't come to mind. Yukinoshita was obvious, but I couldn't imagine Hayama holding a romantic relationship with a specific individual.

I spilled out my impressions. "Honestly, it's hard to imagine… seeing Yukinoshita date anyone."

"…Why?"

"What do you mean 'why'…?"

Even if she looked at me so curiously, I was at a loss. The reason should've been completely clear to me, too.

"In her case, just going out with people is, you know…" I said.

Yuigahama made a grimace and groaned. "Ahh, right. Well, um. That's, er, yeah."

"Right?"

"Mmmm… Ah! No, no, no, that's not what I wanted to ask! But I can't disagree either…" Yuigahama continued groaning while tilting her head.

By then, we had already reached the end of the hallway. And then we were at the front of the club room. Before placing my hand on the door, I coughed once and suppressed my voice.

"Anyway, don't bring this up in the club."

"Eh? Why?"

"…Because she's definitely going to get mad."

"…True!"

It's already been about close to a year since we've known each other. So if I thought about what would happen, then I could imagine Yukinoshita getting angry. If she knew that she was being used as material for the thoughtless gossip, there's no doubt she'd blow a fuse.

Before entering the room, Yuigahama and I exchanged looks and nodded. I then opened the door to the room that we hadn't been in for a long time.

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The club interior was already warm. I let out a breath of relief and sat at my usual seat.

There was a whole cake on the top of the table in front of me that was excitedly prepared by Yuigahama and split into four portions.

"Happy birthday!"

"Congrats."

"Congratulations!"

We all congratulated her and Yukinoshita fidgeted from embarrassment.

"Th-Thank you… Um, I-I suppose it'd be better to have tea here," said Yukinoshita. She stood up from her seat and elatedly began preparing black tea. Along with the sound of clanking tableware, I could hear a surprised "ohhh" to my rear.

"Yukinoshita-senpai, so your birthday was on January 3rd, huh? By the way, my birthday is on April 16th, senpai."

"I didn't ask…"

Why are you even here in the first place, hmmm…?

She tilted her head in doubt and her flaxen hair shook. She greedily tapped her lips with the fork in her small hand, covered with the baggy sleeve of her cardigan worn under her sloppy uniform.

Isshiki Iroha was here at the Service Club as though it's the most natural thing in the world.

She took one portion of the four, also took a paper cup, and drank the tea. Wasn't her adaptability a bit too high? Was she a member of TOKIO[8] or something? She looked like she could survive on a deserted island…

Isshiki sipped her black tea and caressed the paper cup with the baggy sleeves of her cardigan.

"Speaking of which, please call me to the shrine visit, too!"

"And why do I need to do that?"

Speaking of which, I have no way of contacting you, though? Or are you saying to do it telepathically? Is there some kind of no service charge benefit? Or is it that? Are you using this as a chance to enact your strategy of standing over me mentally by getting my contact info? Too bad for you! I won't fall for something like that! I'll have you know Hachiman knows all about how thinking about things too deeply meant digging your own grave!

I thought arbitrarily, but Isshiki was distracted, not thinking too deeply about it and sighed.

"I mean, everyone went to the shrine visit, right? Then, that obviously means Hayama-senpai will be there."

"No, he wasn't there with us…"

"Of course. In that case, never mind then," said Isshiki. She turned her face away and killed the conversation. Iroha ga Kill![9] Killing things in a single stroke… The only things that felt similar to that were the anime audience and Battousai the Manslayer[10].

Well, Isshiki's feelings were understandable. I could get why she'd think Hayama would be present if Miura and the others were. What I didn't get was why Isshiki was at our club.

"So, why are you here?"

"Ehhh, I mean, right now, there's nothing to do at the student council."

"There's plenty of stuff, not that I'd know. Go to club then. You're still the manager, aren't you?" I said.

Isshiki lightly tapped my shoulders. "Now, now, what's the big problem? Ah, I know. I'm actually here to pick up the luggage we left here during Christmas."

"You totally made that up just now."

The reason sounded so out of place that it could be portable.

“Haa…”

Yukinoshita sighed and next to her, Yuigahama had a wry smile. *Good grief, Irohasu…* Everyone was astonished and astonished that we were going to become Aguirre’s JAPAN[11], but Isshiki looked unperturbed. She was so unperturbed that I wanted to turn her into a Keroyon[12]-like doll and place her in front of a pharmacy.

Finding it awkward that everyone was focused on her, Isshiki blew at her tea that wasn’t even hot and tried to play it off.

“Ah, speaking of which.” Isshiki suddenly spoke up and looked at Yukinoshita. Yukinoshita tilted her head in response and Isshiki smiled. She then blurted something outrageous. “Yukinoshita-senpai, are you dating Hayama-senpai?”

“Come again?” Yukinoshita tilted her head even further making it almost at a ninety degree angle.

Behh, how is this girl able to step on land mines so nonchalantly…? What’s with this Hurt Locker[13]…? She went and asked her directly without leading up to the question, too. That’s like an old-timer pitcher in baseball who knew the Masakari style[14] where he’d throw a fast straight ball without any signs.

No, but this was Isshiki. She definitely asked on purpose. And the reason why she was at this club was also to validate the rumor.

“Isshiki-san…”

Yukinoshita’s voice was cold. Behind that smile enveloped with the thin veil of the northern lights were eyes as transparent as the ice carved from the North Pole.

Isshik’s shoulders and voice shook after seeing that face to face.

“Y-Yesssss!” Isshiki pulled back her body as she made the abrupt reply and then hid behind me.

Hold it missy, don’t go using people as shields.

Yukinoshita turned to Isshiki who was peeking from over my shoulders and glared her down.

“…It’s obviously not true.” Yukinoshita asserted her clear rejection.

Isshiki nodded. “I-I know, right! I mean, I totally thought it wasn’t possible! But you just end up getting curious when you hear a rumor like that, you knooow?”

“Rumor?”

Finding that word strange, Yukinoshita looked at Yuigahama and me.

“Ahh, well, some people seem to be talking about something like that…”

“You know how we went out last time? It sounds like people saw you two and made a mistake,” said Yuigahama.

Yukinoshita let out a deep sigh looking fed up. “I see. So it’s something like petty suspicion…”

Well, for high school students, love affairs were a considerably enjoyable topic. When that involved two conspicuous individuals like Hayama and Yukinoshita, they’d want to suspect them even more.

Since Isshiki liked Hayama, it wouldn’t be strange for her to try to confirm the rumor. I looked at Isshiki and she was tilting her head in contemplation.

“But doesn’t this sound pretty bad?”

“I suppose so. It certainly is bothersome to the people involved.”

“Ah, no, I didn’t mean that.”

Isshiki modestly turned down that idea and Yukinoshita inclined her head to the side.

“What do you mean?” Yukinoshita asked.

Isshiki stuck up a finger. “There hasn’t ever been a rumor that specific for Hayama-senpai before, strangely enough.”

“Ahh, that’s true…” Yuigahama looked up at the ceiling and answered in agreement.

I see. Now that she brought it up, I don’t think I’ve heard anyone talk about Hayama Hayato’s love situation. No, well, it’s not like I knew about anyone else. There’s no one that would tell me, after all… As Yukinoshita mentioned earlier, the only thing I could do was suspect. Or I could even try googling with Kokkuri-san[15].

“That’s why all the girls seem super interested in that rumor, you knooow.” Isshiki nodded with her arms crossed.

Hayama Hayato never had a frivolous rumor like this before. So if it’s about whom he was going out with, of course, it’s going to be about him. It wouldn’t be strange at all. The girls who held interest in Hayama likely had their misgivings about it. And those misgivings actualized into this rumor. Just what kind of effect would that have on the human relationships surrounding Hayama?

“…A rumor, huh? Rather karmic, isn’t it?” Yukinoshita muttered. Her tone wasn’t directed at anyone. The tea cup she was looking at had formed small ripples.

“W-Well, you know! If you just ignore it, it should go away eventually! You know how they say rumors last only for 49 days!”

“It’s 75 days.”

Who died? Was there a recent Buddhist memorial service[16] or something?

“Anyway! Let’s just ignore it, okay?” said Yuigahama, being considerate of Yukinoshita.

Certainly, the only thing we could right now was just to stay quiet. Complaining to the people talking about the rumor out of fun was pointless. We just needed to be as quiet as shells that were deeply submerged under water. Staying silent in the face of malicious misunderstandings and trends of fun was the only countermeasure.

Getting flustered and desperately arguing back is grounds for nitpicking. As long as their objective remains to be for fun, any form of action can be used as material for their attacks. On top of that, covering for the person will only make you their next target. You can play Roshambo, but you’ll be confirmed the only loser regardless of what the outcome is. You can be criticized for doing nothing as well, but the damage from doing nothing is the lowest you can receive.

Yukinoshita seemed to understand that and made a small nod. “…I suppose so.”

“Okay, let’s get back on schedule and… resume work!”

When Yuigahama let out an even brighter voice, Yukinoshita responded with a smile and took out a laptop.

“Resume work”… What an unpleasant saying.

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Work had to be done no matter how unpleasant it is. In fact, it’s called work exactly because it’s unpleasant. And our very first unpleasant work of the New Year was to check the mail.

A laptop covered in dust was pulled from the corner of the clubroom for the purpose of going through the “Chiba Prefecture Problem Consultation Mails” that had been neglected for a while.

The laptop that Hiratsuka-sensei had borrowed from somewhere was a considerably old model, so it took some time to boot up.

While waiting for it, Yukinoshita rummaged through her bag. After cheerfully taking out a glasses case, she silently slipped on the glasses.

When I met her gaze behind the lenses, I instinctively pretended to yawn and looked away. At the corner of my eyes, I could see Yukinoshita casting her face downwards.

“Ah, Yukinon, you look really good in that!” said Yuigahama.

“R-Really?” Yukinoshita gently touched the frame of her glasses and made a probing glance in my direction.

“…Well, yeah… that’s true…”

I felt somehow itchy having my present used so early that I could only manage a hazy reply.

"…Thank you." She said with a small voice and turned her head away in seeming disinterest.

I nodded my head back silently and sipped the tea from my teacup.

Isshiki curiously looked at Yukinoshita. "Yukinoshita-senpai, did you always wear glasses?"

"…They're PC glasses." Yukinoshita mumbled her answer in difficulty without removing her eyes from the laptop's monitor.

Not looking the least interested, Isshiki let out a lax voice while rubbing her paper cup. "Ohhh."

That sure was one apathetic response…

But I did appreciate her indifference.

Had the conversation gone any further, I was sure I was going to squirm in embarrassment. Just look at me now I was fidgeting and my eyes were swimming all over the place!

I adjusted my seat, oddly unable to keep still. Sitting diagonally opposite of me, Yuigahama muttered. "Maybe I should wear glasses too…"

"You don't even look at computers," I said.

Yuigahama turned indignant.

"Maybe I don't! No, actually, I am looking! I totally am! Yukinon, let me see the computer, too!" Yuigahama moved her seat next to Yukinoshita and peered at the computer. "Oh, it looks like we have mail."

"Yes, it looks like it's from… Miura-san," said Yukinoshita, and she rotated the computer towards me.

<yumiko☆–san's Problem>
[How's everyone deciding between the humanities and the sciences?]

Yeah. This was definitely from Miura. She had sent a mail to us before using this name.

Since the monitor was facing me, Isshiki trotted over to my rear with her plate of cake and looked at the screen.

"Mmhmm, so this is about the career path thing, huh? So, which of the two is actually better to go with?" Isshiki placed her fork at her mouth, looked up at me while chewing her cake and asked.

For high school students considering university exams, this question was a problem they had thought over on some occasion. It appeared that Isshiki wasn't an exception.

“Well, if we’re just talking about easy exams, then the humanities are much less stressful. That being said, it’s completely different between public and private schools. For public schools, you need to study for five subjects and seven courses, but for private schools, you just need to study for English, Japanese, and social studies,” I said, giving my opinion.

Isshiki took a step backwards. “…Whoa. Senpai, could it be that you get good grades normally?”

“What’s with the ‘could’……? Eh? ‘Whoa’? Did you just go ‘whoa’? Just what exactly do you take me for…?”

Then, Isshiki made a perky smile and spoke as if saying something good. “Oh, I can’t answer that… See, I’m just not very good at saying bad things about people, you knooow?”

Like I’d know. Also, that’s pretty much an insult already… What’s with this girl…? As I was watching Isshiki, she also looked at me in admiration.

“Senpai, I knew you looked super smart, but you get good grades like normal too, hmmm?”

Mmhmm, don’t tell me, Iroha-chan. Are you acting stubborn because you don’t want to think I’m smart, hmm? Your choice of words is just a little crude, okay?

“Yeah! That’s so true. You see, Hikki’s grades are good *only in humanities*.”

Yuigahama clapped her hands in approval and boasted.

Why are you acting proud…? Also, please don’t emphasize “only in humanities”.

Next to her, Yukinoshita brushed away the hair at her shoulders and made a bold smile. “That’s true. He does have rather good grades. But they aren’t good enough to take the top.”

Why are you acting proud…? Okay, I could see why. Her grades were better than mine, after all…

“So that means senpai’s going with the humanities?”

“Pretty much.”

Isshiki replied with a totally unconcerned “ohhh” when I answered. *Don’t ask me then.*Isshiki then cleared her throat as if indicating she was going into the main topic.

“…So, did Hayama-senpai already decide what to do?”

“Ahh, it looks like Hayato-kun’s already made his decision,” said Yuigahama, remembering.

Isshiki abruptly leaned forward. “Eh, no way? What did Hayama-senpai pick? Like, I just want to know as a reference. It’ll be for my future, so if possible, I’d like to know myself.”

“Mmm, I’m not really sure what it was that he wrote down… Hayato-kun already turned in his questionnaire, too…”

“Oh, I see…” Isshiki dropped her shoulders in dejection.

Finding her pitiful, Yuigahama said in consideration, “Ah, if you want a reference, I know what Tobecchi is doing!”

“No, Tobe-senpai is fine.”

“Instant answer!?”

Reference for what exactly…? As I was astounded, Yukinoshita looked at the monitor with a puzzled face and let out a brief sigh.

“Something wrong?”

“Ah, no, I just thought it was a little unexpected for that Miura-san to be worrying like this.”

“That’s a horrible thing for you to say… I mean, Miura may have a Queen-like temperament with *that* personality, but I’m sure she has her own worries, too.”

“Who’s the one saying horrible things here…? I didn’t mean it like that,” said Yukinoshita, placing her hand to her temple along with an astonished sigh. “I just think it’s unexpected for someone like Miura-san since she seems like a very decisive person. It looks like even Tobe-kun had already decided on a career path, too…”

Was that last part really necessary…? It’s like Tobe became some sort of unrelated victim now… I made a wry smile and Yuigahama ahead of me did the same.

“Ahaha… I mean, even Yumiko gets worried about some things, too. It’s our career path and all.”

“Are career paths really worth worrying about?”

If you have things you want to do, then you should just pick the choice that works for you. If not, then you can just pick university. Isn’t this how high school students in general think?

At most, the only things to worry about in regards to the humanities and sciences are the subject exams and your choices of schools. There are also people who worried about the simplicity of earning units and requirements after enrolling into university and the advantages and disadvantages when job hunting. But if you eliminate the “things you don’t want to do”, your answer should come to you naturally.

People have a hard time finding the things they want to do, but things they don't want to do immediately come to mind.

Yuigahama made a complicated look. "Mmm, that's not what I mean… You know, like, how everyone's going to be apart? It's hard to pick when you think about that."

"Well, yeah… But that's just how it is."

Somewhere and someday, things will eventually end. I'm sure that's natural. That should be even truer for high school life which has a set number of years. I was aware that everyone would be going their separate ways down the road.

That's why I could only say what I did.

Yuigahama slightly dropped her shoulders. "Uh huh. I know that, but… It's just, like, what we want to do and what we're aiming for are all over the place, so… Besides, if we split up into the humanities and the sciences, we won't be able to stay in the same classes…"

"By that logic, I'll always be in another class since my curriculum is different in the first place…" Yukinoshita said with a quiet voice and turned her face away.

It looked like she was pouting, finding that difficult to understand. Yukinoshita belonged to the International Cultivation class, so her normal curriculum was different from ours. In the first place, she had only one class, so she'd be stuck with that class for three years.

"S-Sorry, Yukinon! That's not what I wanted to say… I-I mean I don't really get it, but it's totally okay even if you're in a different class, Yukinon!" Yuigahama quickly embraced Yukinoshita.

Indeed. How beautiful it is to be good friends.[17] Gahama-san and Yukinon are best friends forever!

Examining us suspiciously the entire time, Isshiki lifted her face. "Ahh, so that's what's going on."

"Say what?" I asked.

Isshiki made an elated smile and pointed at the computer. "This mail is from Miura-senpai, right? So what Miura-senpai wants to know is about Hayama-senpai, don't you think? Your classes will be determined by this for next year, after all."

You don't say. A short mail like this had that deep of a meaning packed into it? Translating girl-lingo sentences was too hard. If this was a compulsory class, wouldn't there be people flunking one after the other? On the same note, translations of boy-lingo sentences typically amounted to "I want to be popular", so they were the easiest to understand.

So we were able to figure out the meaning behind the mail thanks to Isshiki Iroha, a member of the girl-lingo committee, but there was one problematic point.

“But would Miura do something roundabout like this? Putting Isshiki aside.”

“Senpai, what exactly do you take me foooor…?” Isshiki glared at me in discontent.

Well, you were the one who used me as a pretense to ask about Hayama’s career path earlier…

But it looked like there were things only fellow girls could understand as Yuigahama was moaning in contemplation. Ah, by the way, she was still hugging Yukinoshita, who was completely at her mercy.

“That makes sense… I mean she was pretty worried about it in class, so maybe… Yumiko’s quite the maiden in her own way, too…”

“I knooow! Look at me, I’m a total maiden too, right?” Isshiki nodded and sought my agreement.

Hmmm… Isshiki and Miura didn’t really feel like maidens… Miura particularly, she was more like a gang leader, Yokohama in particular. I wonder if it’s because of her name.[18]

But well, Miura was the one who brought up the topic about career paths with everyone. Yuigahama and Ebina-san was one thing, but I couldn’t imagine Miura having any interest in Tobe’s choice. I know I didn’t.

In the same way Isshiki used me as a pretense to ask about Hayama’s career path earlier, this meant Miura went through the steps in order to ask the target of her interest the same thing. The person in question ended up refusing with a reason very typical of him, though…

So that’s why we received an investigative mail like this.

If what Isshiki said was true about Miura wanting to be in the same classes as Hayama next year as well, then she had to choose the same path.

Every year, the third year classes were organized into seven classes for the humanities and three classes for the sciences. You’re betting against luck even if you chose the same path to be in the same classes, but the possibility never existed in the first place if you chose something different.

On top of that, the classes for the humanities and the sciences were on separate floors. The humanities and sciences were separated into classes, the former on the second floor and the latter on the first.

The more distance placed between them, the less chances they’d have to meet. This was a matter of life and death for maidens in love.

“Then, couldn’t she just ask him herself?” said Yukinoshita while pulling Yuigahama off of her.

It must’ve been suffocating having Yuigahama clinging onto her the entire time even though it was winter. Her taut arms closely resembled a cat that grew tired of being hugged.

“It did come up when were together in class, but Hayato-kun said to think about it on your own and he didn’t tell us what he picked…”

“Isn’t that because everyone was there? If it’s just you two, then you can smoothly ask him. That might earn you some points, tooooo.”

“It’s not that easy.”

Isshiki explained to us while she was wagging her finger, but unfortunately, I’m sure it wasn’t that simple of a problem.

Even if you thought you were close, there were a lot of things you couldn’t ask about.

About the future. About the present. And about the past. There’s no telling where a land mine could be buried.

What would happen if you forced yourself to ask something only to receive an answer you weren’t hoping for? Just the thought of it caused you to be at a loss for words.

I indulged in my thoughts and Yukinoshita spoke up. “What shall we do about this consultation?”

“Well, for now, let’s try giving it a shot.”

Our original purpose wasn’t to interfere with a person’s relationships, but providing support was within the scope of our work. Besides, if we managed to restore Hayama and Miura’s relationship back to normal, then that worthless rumor should disappear as well.

“Got it! I’ll try asking again tomorrow.”

“I suppose so. That may be a good idea. I’m sorry, but can we count on you?”

“Yeah!” Yuigahama cheerfully answered, but quickly made a dejected look and added. “I’m not sure if he’ll tell me though…”

Well, since Hayama didn’t tell Miura or Tobe in class, it’s hard to imagine he’d tell Yuigahama who was classified on the same level as those two. For the same reason, it’d be impossible for Isshiki.

Judging from Hayama’s tone in class, I think what Hayama was worried about was limiting the choices of the people he was close with because of his influence.

In that case, a person who was outside of that category, a person who wouldn’t be influenced should ask him. Those who fell under that category were limited.

I glanced at Yukinoshita.

But she was bending her head slightly to the side in wonder.

…Well, it’d be inane to have Yukinoshita approach Hayama when that rumor had already made its way around. Hayama not telling us his career path wouldn’t be the problem. We’d end up with another problem altogether instead.

I guess I'm the only one… Though, anything good coming from me asking was another story.

"I guess we don't have a choice. I'll ask him…" I said, and Yuigahama and Yukinoshita looked at me in surprise.

"Eh, Hikki will?"

"Will you be okay? Are you sure… you can hold a conversation?"

"You're concerned about the wrong thing here… Actually, I don't have any confidence either."

Even so, as fellow natives, we should be able to at least talk to each other. Well, my words could get through to him, but that didn't mean we'd understand each other. There, too, were things that couldn't get across with the usage of barely similar languages. That's being negative, not native, wasn't it?

"But it's not like there isn't a possibility."

"What do you mean?"

"If he's not telling the people he's close with, then the only thing we can try is the opposite. It's because a person's unrelated that you could tell him things."

"…I see. So it's something like confessing and repenting."

"Repenting…" Yuigahama repeated the word that she wasn't familiar with, her mouth opened.

I'll explain that to her later… Yukinoshita was slightly exaggerating, but she wasn't off the mark.

In our everyday lives, there were plenty of things to be repentant about. You had middle-aged men casually complaining to other people at the counter of a bar or a pub and there were even people who recited the story of their life to an unknown number of anonymous people on SNS and bulletin boards. It's because there was a nonexistent relationship between both parties that there were things they could talk about. Though in my case, saying things to people I didn't know was impossible and also something I didn't like.

"Anyway, I'll try asking. There's no harm in trying."

This was what corporate slaves would call "act dumb and listen". This skill of coincidentally overhearing information was a required for newcomer corporate slaves. The way you work was dependent on whether you're able to use this skill. My source was my papan grumbling about new employees nowadays. When I think about having to work under a superior like that, my desire to work went up in smoke, but still. Regardless, I was on the verge of acquiring another corporate slave ability again…

But it's not like we had any other method. So the only thing was to try asking the person in question personally.

Once we cleared the initial stage of figuring out our course of action, Isshiki stood up after a short sigh.

"Okay, I'm going to head back now. Thank you for the tea. Yui-senpai, if you learn anything, please let me know, too!" Isshiki said. She bowed her head and was going to leave the room.

I called to her back. "Hey, your stuff."

"Ah."

Isshiki turned back from where she was and played it off with a "teehee" smile. She then picked up the stacked cardboard box at the corner of the room.

"Here we go, oomph."

Nothing was more dangerous than Isshikii's staggering footing as she carried the cardboard box in her arms. Before I knew it, I had extended my hands out and took the boxes from Isshiki. My Komachi training skill had automatically activated. I really couldn't deactivate this skill at all…

"Th-Thank you very much! Also, can I ask you to carry them to the student council room, too?"

"Yeah, yeah…"

Well, guess I'll have to. I turned around at the front of the door to inform Yukinoshita and Yuigahama first before leaving and the both of them had stopped entirely and were staring at the cardboard box.

"……"

"……"

Huh? Why are you guys quiet?

"…Alright, I'm going to carry these over real fast," I said.

Then, Yukinoshita twitched in response and began cleaning up the tableware, still silent. *Again, why are you quiet…?*

When she was nearly done, she turned to Yuigahama. "…Shall we stop here for today?"

"R-Right! Let's all carry the stuff over then!" Yuigahama answered and stood up noisily from her seat. She grabbed her backpack and started out the room. Yukinoshita carried her bag around her shoulder and slowly walked. Isshiki was watching them in confusion.

"Ummm… we don't really need that many people…"

"…I'm locking the room, so can you please leave the room?"

"Y-Yesss."

Yukinoshita urged her with a cold smile and Isshiki frantically went out the room.

The deserted hallway felt far much colder than the atmospheric temperature.

The hallway of the special building was suspended in a dim glow whereas it was already completely dark outside.

I readjusted the cardboard box in my hand as I was watching the three walk in front of me.

Messily packed inside were the ornaments used during the Christmas event.

Although the interior of the box was in a jumble, I could feel a definite weight on my arms.

Chapter 4

2Even so, **Miura Yumiko** feels she wants to know.

The campus after school was penetratingly cold. A few days had passed since we received that mail and we were heading further into winter.

Even though it was so clear out and warm during the day, the temperature immediately dipped as soon as the sun settled.

Following that was also the wind.

The winter sea breeze blew freely without being obstructed by any large buildings due to the school being on the coast. Chiba Prefecture also happened to be the flattest prefecture in Japan. It's a well-ventilated prefecture. Incidentally, it's a prefecture where young people were active At Home[1]. What the heck was this? This sounded like a help wanted advertisement for a black company[2]. I found myself convinced that Chiba would turn into a corporate slave breeding place as a bedroom town[3] for Tokyo. How mysterious!

But having lived here as a citizen of Chiba for the past seventeen years, even my body had grown accustomed to this freezing wind. Thanks to that, I also ended up getting used to the harshness of criticism from society.

A stronger wind blew even harder and I adjusted the collars of my coat. I adjusted my gaze towards the soccer club afar.

I waited for the soccer club to finish their practice near the bike parking area that was just about concealed by the special building.

As discussed the other day, it was to ask Hayama about his career path. I spent a few days waiting for the timing, but unable to get just the two of us alone, I opted for lurking until he was on his way home from club.

Still, with how warm the clubroom I was in earlier, I was enduring the cold.

I left the room when they started to clean up as I was watching them from the windows of the clubroom, but it looked like I was a bit too early. They were doing their stretches.

As I was waiting in the meantime, I was distracted by the cold and lightly stamped at the floor until my sleeve was tugged on.

I turned around and some kind of fluffy cat getup was grasping a can of coffee.

"Here, take this."

Called by the voice, I lifted up my face and Yukinoshita, with cat mittens on, was holding out a can of MAX COFFEE. *So you're using those mittens, huh…?*

"Ohhh, thanks."

I appreciatively took the can. *Soooooo warm!* In place of a hand warmer, I kneaded the MAX COFFEE in my hand.

Yuigahama was rubbing her hands together in the back while Yukinoshita was pressing her cat mittens against her cheeks. The two came to check on the situation, but there were no signs of Hayama coming yet.

I looked up at the sky that became dark as if it was blotted in ink and said, "…It's fine if you guys go home first."

"But we can't let you handle everything…"

Yuigahama was stumped and looked at Yukinoshita for agreement. Yukinoshita nodded.

I shook my head. "No, it's a lot easier for me to ask him alone, probably. Wouldn't it be harder for him to talk with you guys? Not that I'd know."

For Yukinoshita to approach Hayama at a place like this and at this time of the day wasn't a very good idea. It's plausible enough that gossipy people would start talking about things that happened and didn't happen. Because of that, the way I spoke was somewhat indirect.

Yukinoshita placed her hand on her chin thinking for a moment, but then raised her face. "I see… Well, that's true, too."

"Mmm, I still think it'd be better for me to ask though."

"In that case, I'm sorry for leaving this up to you…"

"No, it's fine. If it's work, then there's no getting around it." The two looked at me anxiously and I answered them with a laid back tone.

Yukinoshita smiled. "That's rather out of character for you to say."

Seriously. I made an instinctive, self-deprecating smile and nodded. Yuigahama readjusted her backpack on her back looking like she made her decision.

"Okay, see you tomorrow then."

"Yeah. See you tomorrow."

I lightly waved my hand to the two walking to the front gate and turned my gaze back towards the soccer club again. They had finally moved from the grounds and were heading to their club room. *Ah, crap. That's right, they change in the club room, huh? Oh, maybe they're going to take showers, too? I've never been in a sports club, so I wasn't really sure about this stuff…*

I guess I'll have to move over to their side. While sipping at my MAX COFFEE to make it last, I leaned against the wall of the new school building that was immediately next to the club room.

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When the sun dipped entirely under the horizon, it felt much, much colder. Nevertheless, I persisted in my observation of their movements, waiting impatiently for them to return.

But it really is cold… Although this may have been for work, why did I have to wait for Hayama anyway? Couldn't we just interview his guardian spirit[4] instead of asking him and call it a day?

My heart is already broken. My body is of ice and my legs of sticks… As I stood here alone with no signs of anyone coming, I thought I was on the verge of activating a reality marble[5] of the sort…

But the wait eventually proved worthwhile. The soccer club members started making their way towards me.

Hayama, however, wasn't present in the group. *Why the heck isn't he there…?*

I got off the wall and looked around. Then, I called out to a person in the group. It was Tobe who had brown hair that was noticeable from afar and was in a cheery mood.

"Ohh snap? Ain't it Hikitani-kun. What's up?"

He approached me while candidly waving his hands, so I lightly raised my hand back.

"Where's Hayama?"

"Hayato-kun…? Ahh, he's kinda in the middle of somethin' right now," said Tobe, his eyes swimming around.

I tried following his eyes around, but Hayama was nowhere to be seen.

"He's not here?"

"Nah, it ain't so much that he ain't here. He's here, but was here?"

Tobe's words were vaguely incoherent. *So, which is it? You sure are a pain…*

"If he's not here, then tough luck… Alright, I'll head home then."

I was just a tad bit dissatisfied leaving empty-handed after all that waiting, but if there wasn't anything to be gained, it was better to head on home. In gambling, cutting your losses was a basic. That, too, could be utilized in the gamble called life. Seriously, wasn't my life just an endless series of loss cutting?

I said my goodbye to Tobe and headed for the bicycle parking station.

"…Ah!"

I thought I heard Tobe's voice from behind, but I ignored it and continued on.

Then, behind the school building, I discovered Hayama. *What do you know? He's here, after all.* It looked like he had used the path that led to the side gate instead of the one that led to the front gate.

I stepped forward for a few steps thinking how to initiate a conversation and I abruptly stopped in my tracks.

It’s because at a spot where the orange glow of the lampposts barely reached, I noticed someone else besides Hayama.

Reflexively, I hid myself with the wall of the school building. I pressed my back against the wall, feeling the coldness of the surface.

I couldn’t tell who the person with Hayama was since it was so dark. But I could tell from the person’s stature that it was a girl. And judging from the tone of the disjointed “I’m sorry for calling you out here so suddenly” and so forth of the conversation that I could hear along with the wind, it was presumably a girl in our year.

The girl was wearing a dark blue pea coat with a red scarf. She looked up at Hayama’s face with upturned eyes, squeezing the scarf at her bosom. I could still tell at this distance that her slender shoulders were trembling from nervousness.

—-Ahh, so that’s what’s going on.

That explained why Tobe was being evasive.

The girl took a small breath and gripped the collars of her coat as if readying herself.

“Um… I heard from my friends. Hayama-kun, is it true you’re dating someone right now?”

“No, it’s not.”

“Then, would you like to…”

“Sorry. I can’t really think about that right now.”

Their voices small, I could only overhear the conversation up to that point.

But from then on, I couldn’t hear them any longer.

I’m sure both of them were at a loss for words.

However, voices or not, I could tell.

It was a feeling of hopelessness far from a straining tension unique to the situation and far from a sensation of pleasantry. The mood that was strikingly similar to the cold winter sky was something I had experienced very recently.

This resembled that one act between Isshiki Iroha and Hayama Hayato during the Christmas season at Destinyland.

Before long, they spoke a few words to each other, likely to be their goodbyes. The girl waved her hand weakly, turned around, and walked off.

Hayama’s shoulders slightly dropped as he watched her leave. He made a prolonged breath and lifted his face. And it was then I entered his field of vision.

Hayama smiled, not from shame, embarrassment, or even joy, but just resignation. “I guess you caught me in a weird situation.”

“Ahh, well, you know… My bad.”

Since he called out to me first, I lost my initiative. I wasn't able to say anything worthwhile as a result. No, even if he didn't speak up first, in the end, I still didn't know how I was supposed to call out to him. I could've given words of consolation if it was someone who was rejected, but if it's someone who did the rejecting, I had no idea what to say.

But seeing through my hesitation, Hayama seemingly made a smile. "Don't worry about it. The guys from my club were being pretty considerate of me today, too."

The way he sounded was as if this had happened several times already in the past few days.

"Huh… Must be rough."

There honestly wasn't anything else for me to say. I wasn't particularly interested in Hayama Hayato's love life nor was I envious of the attention he received for someone of his position. It might've been nice of me to tease him by cracking a joke, but unfortunately, we weren't that close.

For an instant, Hayama's face distorted into a full smile, as if his breathing was blocked, as if he was enduring some kind of pain.

But he immediately shook his head lightly, wearing his typical smile, and motioned with his chin towards the bicycle parking station. I walked after him.

"Yukinoshita-san probably has it worse than I do."

"Huh? Yukinoshita? Why?" I reflexively asked back when he suddenly brought up her name.

Without turning back, Hayama crudely spat out. "There are a lot of people like that out there, people that get a kick out of digging into people's lives. They're probably just curious, but there are people who find it bothersome too."

Hayama's voice took on an unusually sharper tone. I couldn't associate him with the image of the guy who always wore a gentle smile.

But I knew that he was speaking about the recent rumor.

I'm sure the reason why the girl earlier confessed to Hayama was because that rumor had made its way around. Her friends definitely used that as a pretense to spur her on. These past few days were probably the same way.

Hayama glanced back at me as he was walking. His apologetic expression, his eyebrows somewhat lowered, was illuminated by the glow of the lampposts.

"It might be causing trouble for Yukinoshita-san too. Sorry, but can you apologize to her for me?"

"Do it yourself."

“I’d like to, but it’s not a good idea to approach her right now… If I did, it’s enough for people to thoughtless blow up the rumors again. It’s better to just let it be.”

He sounded like he had gone through this before. It felt as if he was recalling the truth he had gained from those past experiences.

And perhaps, that truth wasn’t something that only he had gained. It’s likely she did as well.

I stopped abruptly because that thought crossed my mind. But I somehow managed to move my legs forward and took a step.

“You seem used to it… Did this happen a lot before?”

“……Speaking of which, didn’t you need me for something?”

When I asked, Hayama momentarily shrugged his shoulders and suddenly came out with something completely different. That was enough to tell me that he didn’t want to delve into the issue any further.

In that case, that was the line I couldn’t step over. In accordance with the line presented before me, I discussed something else.

“No, it’s not anything important. I just wanted to ask you something… Like, your career path and stuff,” I said.

Hayama muttered quietly, “Is that it?” and made a wry smile. “Did someone ask you to?”

“No, well… it’s for reference.”

I couldn’t really reveal that Miura was the one who made the request. As I stood there unable to answer, Hayama let out a sigh as he was walking ahead.

“…Is it… because it’s for work again?” The words he responded with were cold and somehow had a hint of scorn to them. I couldn’t look at Hayama’s face ahead. Only his stiffly gripped fist came into view. “You’re the same as usual.”

His packed words that he uttered could be heard distinctly even in this headwind. Whenever the wind blew, the galvanized iron roofing would creak and the neglected, rusting bike would rattle.

Those noises were unpleasant, making my replying voice turn sharp.

“I said it before. That’s the kind of club it is. It’s voluntary service.”

“I see. Can you do me a favor then?” Hayama declared and stopped. He then turned towards me. “Can you stop doing bothersome things like that?”

He wasn’t smiling. His gripped fist loosened and his voice was monotone and had no strength. Despite that, his voice resounded quietly in the night campus without getting drowned out by the wind.

With no words I could reply or continue with, a small silence fell over us.

But that was only for a moment.

Hayama promptly smiled and then asked with a mocking tone as though in jest. “…Or something. What would you do if I told you an objection like that?”

“What I would do…? I’ll think about it when that happens, obviously.”

“…I see.”

From that point on, we didn’t say anything more to each other until we made it to the front of the bicycle parking station. Hayama stopped his feet and pointed at the side gate.

“I’ll be going home by car.”

“Right. I see.”

I told him meaning to say goodbye, but Hayama didn’t budge.

All he did was look up at the sky.

Wondering if there was something he could see up there, I looked as well.

However, the only things I could see were the school building dimmed with light and the glow of the lampposts reflected against the glass windows. The moon and stars weren’t there, only the projection of an artificial glow.

Then, Hayama suddenly spoke up in recollection. “As for your question earlier, I’ll leave the answer up to your imagination. I don’t know who asked you, but… if you make your choice without giving it any thought, you’re definitely going to regret it.”

Hayama walked off.

He went towards the dark, dark area where the light of the lampposts didn’t reach. I knew that direction led to the side gate, but for just a moment, I wasn’t sure where he was heading to.

Those words he uttered that should’ve been directed to someone who wasn’t here.

Yet, strangely enough, it felt as though those words weren’t directed to that someone at all.

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There’s one thing I noticed as I spent my days at school while insubstantially contemplating over the habits and incidents of the man named Hayama Hayato.

It’s that Isshiki Iroha’s anxiety wasn’t unfounded.

It’s like Isshiki had mentioned in the clubroom the other day. The recent rumor was affecting Hayama’s surroundings.

Gossip concerning Hayama and Yukinoshita crept its way around, be it the classroom or the hallway.

It’s a natural effect considering those two were prominent celebrities in this school. They garnered equal interest from both genders.

Even as I was spacing out in the classroom during break time, I could tell that my classmates were making ganders at Hayama.

Chatter between girls sitting diagonally behind me were could be heard now as well.

“How true do you think it is?”

“No idea. It really does make you wonder. Maybe they’re actually dating, you think?”

“But some girls from class E said it wasn’t true.”

“Well duh. They’re not gonna rub it in by saying it’s true. They’re so nice!”

“Nice, my butt! That’s actually hilarious.”

They didn’t specifically mention it, but more likely than not, they were talking about the rumor about Hayama and Yukinoshita.

Instead of talking about the unfounded rumor, they made baseless gossip. Only, the problem was there was an allure to it. It’s why people were so focused on it and were amused by it.

Well, chatter, chatter melon[6] was all the rage with seventeen year old girls and if it’s concerning nearby famous people in their school, then it was an especially simple topic to talk about.

The girls, whose names I wasn’t sure of, continued whispering.

“But it sure is a surprise. Yukinoshita-san looks like that, but she’s pretty into looks too, huh?”

“Ohh, I totally get that. They’re dating without even talking to each other. It’s like, she’s literally only after his looks or something?”

“Huh? Doesn’t that make Hayama-kun the same then?”

“I guessss?”

They giggled to each other with quiet voices. It looked like they were at least trying to be considerate with Hayama and the others in the same class in a way so they couldn’t hear.

But it was incredibly grating to my ears.

It was irritating. It really was.

The grating gossip was like hearing mosquitoes buzz around you as you tried to sleep or like hearing the second hand of a clock ticking on a late, restless night. Just listening made me click my tongue.

I had absolutely nothing to do with the rumor and even I was getting irritated. I could imagine the people involved in the rumors were even more so.

Completely ignorant people would spout whatever they wanted with their baseless speculation, deduction, desires, and jealousy and carry the story in an amusing direction, jumping on the bandwagon.

Perhaps, most of them didn't mean any harm. Except, their only reason for involvement was because it was fun that way. And you seriously took it up with them in protest? They'd tell you, "It's just a joke, don't get so worked up".

It's because I could see it, no, it's because I knew those two that I understood for the first time.

Yukinoshita Yukino and Hayama Hayato had been living in this kind of environment. For how much expectations and attention that were placed on them for their beautiful appearance and excellent ability, they had to accept the disappointment and envy alone.

In a society that scrutinized puberty, school is the very definition of a prison. Those who are popular are constantly the center of public attention. The masses take it upon themselves to watch over them. And occasionally, they punish them. It's similar to holding the Stanford Prison Experiment on a day and night basis. Their sense of duty transitions into something aggressive of their own accord.

The nameless prison guards behind me continued their worthless chatter.

Then, there was a solid, tapping noise along with the voices. The girls went quiet.

I turned towards the source of the noise.

In doing so, what I saw was Miura crossing her legs and tapping irritably on her desk with her nails. Her face was directed towards Yuigahama and the others, but her eyes were glaring this way.

Miura's gaudy, moreover well-featured, appearance was already intense when directly faced, but the mean look she had in her side glance was much more so. As a matter of fact, she was scary, like three times scarier than normal. She wasn't even glaring at me and I still found myself looking away.

Ahead of where I turned to, Hayama was sitting in front of Miura, smiling wryly at her.

The things in the conversation between the girls probably weren't heard by Hayama and Miura.

But it was evident from the mood.

You didn't need to hear what was said or what was in a conversation because in this classroom, you could sense whether things were favoring you or excluding you. Miura was transmitting her hostility in this space with just a single glare.

Both girls stood up, finding it difficult to remain in class, and hastily shuffled past me outside. Oh my, chitchatting in the classroom, I wonder?

"Wasn't that super bad just now? Did she hear us?"

“I dunno… But I wonder what Miura-san thinks about it.”

“Who knooows?”

I fell forward on my desk pretending as if I didn’t overhear the conversation they had when they passed me. I had the feeling that if I didn’t do that, I’d end up staring in the direction of Miura and the others.

Ripples that expanded on the surface of water would eventually disappear.

But there’s also the case of the butterfly effect.

I patiently waited through the break, listening closely to the wind that tapped against the window.

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The wind persisted even after school.

Cold, arid winds blew through the Kanto Plain. The suspended humid air from the Sea of Japan was obstructed by a range of mountains including the Ou Mountains. The clouds stopped there while the winds continued blowing downwards.

The freezing, dry winds struck the windows outside of the clubroom at the hallway.

The clubroom inside was damp and warm, however. Much of that was primarily due to the warmth of the tea in front of me.

I sipped my teacup and settled down. I said, “Well, I was magnificently shot down by Hayama-san…”

I sounded somewhat apologetic since I did make that grandstanding of “I’ll ask him!” initially. After reporting the news of yesterday, Yuigahama showed a bitter smile.

“Uh huh, I knew that was gonna happen. Hayato-kun seems to be in a bad mood, too… It’s okay Hikki, it’s not your fault.”

I’m getting consoled… Yukinoshita sighed with an ironic smile after her.

“We never expected anything in the first place, so you don’t need to be concerned about it.”

Her words seemed awfully questionable as encouragement, but I could feel some hint of kindness in her voice.

But the voice that followed had a stronger sense of disappointment.

“Well, that’s *def*initely, *def*initely senpai for you.”
Why’d you emphasize the first syllable twice? Am I going to die two times?
“And why are *you* here again?” I looked at Isshiki.

Isshiki placed the paper cup she had in her hand on the table, straightened her collars, brushed the hems of her skirt, and while she was at it, fiddled with her bangs, and sat formally.

“I’m here today this time for a proper consultation,” said Isshiki, looking completely serious.

But the glimpse of her collarbone from her straightened collars, the fluttering of her skirt filling my mind, and her groomed bangs, the power of her upward gaze had increased. She looked far from appearing serious.

She had my attention for just an instant, but I strengthened my heart and removed my gaze from Isshiki, feeling maybe just a little regretful. *I’m not falling for that…*

“If it’s for the student council, I’m not helping anymore.”

“…Oh, okay.” Isshiki muttered dejectedly.

It sounded like she clicked her tongue afterwards, but I was just imagining it, right? Irohasu?

Watching our interaction, Yukinoshita cleared her throat. “Surely you didn’t come all this way just so you could have us assist you, right?”

There was a pressure in her voice as she smiled. Her tone was so soft, yet icy chills ran up my spine. Isshiki promptly straightened her posture.

“O-Of course! I was just kidding! I’m making sure to do my work!”

“Then, what’s your business?” Yukinoshita asked, sighing with exasperation from seeing Isshiki’s attitude.

Yuigahama mediated. “Iroha-chan’s probably curious about Hayato-kun’s career path and came to ask about it, right?”

“That’s my Yui-senpai! That’s exactly why I’m here! Buuuut, that’s not the only thing.”

Yukinoshita looked at her to go on. Isshiki lightly placed her hand on her chin and contemplatively spoke. “It’s liiike, there’s been an increase in people making passes at Hayama-senpai.”

“Passes?”

“Well, confessing to him, basically. Even if it doesn’t go well, they do it just to check, like an appeal of the sort.” Isshiki apathetically answered Yuigahama’s question.

The incident from yesterday then came to mind. Of course, I didn’t mention to Yukinoshita or Yuigahama what I witnessed, so they seemed to have been thinking about other things.

“What do you mean by ‘check’?”

“Is that really gonna work as an appeal?”

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama looked at Isshiki in puzzlement. Isshiki cleared her throat and sat up straight. Then, she turned her seat towards me.

Isshiki let out a brief, but passionate breath and gazed at me in earnest. "Senpai… is there… anyone you're dating right now?"

Her voice faintly trembled, her speech erratic, and her cheeks flushed. Peeping out from her excessively long sleeve was her thin wrist that was surprisingly white. She timidly squeezed the ribbon at her bosom with the hand of that wrist, the creases of her shirt exhibiting an air of excitement.

For only a slight moment, her moist eyes quivered.

She had struck me at such an unexpected angle that I could feel my heart beat faster. I swallowed my breath to calm it down.

"No… not really…" I spat out with a rasping voice.

The room went dead still.

Naturally, I was quiet, but so were Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. In that silence, Isshiki made a mean-spirited smile. "See, something like this, yeah!"

"Th-The problem's obviously the way you said it! Right, Hikki?"

……No, that appeal didn't exactly not hit home, yep. No actually, it really did hit home. Isshiki Iroha, you're pretty darn good.

"Hikki?"

I turned to Yuigahama and Yukinoshita when I was called and I was being eyed with a dull look.

"…And just *why* are you quiet?" Yukinoshita pleasantly smiled.
Stop that. That smile of yours is really scary, you know.

"W-Well, you know, yeah. I get Hayama's situation now. I totally get it."

They went to check the validity of the rumor and while they were at it, they tried confessing too. Failure notwithstanding, it'd serve as a trigger for the two of them to grow closer, or something to that effect.

Maybe this was one of those appendix scenario additions that unlocked the route for a character you couldn't conquer at the beginning…? Or was it some kind fan disk that added a scenario of giggling and screaming, hmm??

Anyway, it could be said that this was also the doing of the rumor.

"So, what did you want to discuss?" I asked.

Isshiki acted overbearing. "I want to know how to get ahead of my rivals!"

"Right…"

She had some guts for not giving up this late in the game. I replied half-impressed, half-disgusted, and half-disinterested. Oh wait, that's 1.5 times the regular amount.

Isshiki interpreted that as a response from me and arbitrarily continued her story. "Considering the situation right now, it's a chance for me. People

noooormally give up after confessing, right? Hayama-senpai seems totally sick of the confessions too, so that's where I can come in as a 'safe tile'[7] and ambush—I mean, I can, like, give him some plump comfort!"

That's quite the forced correction there… What the heck did plump comfort even mean? Isshiki wasn't exactly plump either… It's the immaturity Isshiki gave off from her flash image that was her charm… Ah, that's not what this was about. I didn't care enough about what'd happen between Hayama and Isshiki that I stopped listening halfway through.

I looked over at the other two wondering if they were listening and they were intently doing so.

"Safe tile…"

"Ambush…"

Yuigahama and Yukinoshita muttered in repetition and sent Isshiki a serious gaze. It's like, they were so serious that I could feel the room temperature instantly plunge… It's most certainly not calm![8]

Their stares, however, weren't noticed by Isshiki. It's because she was looking outside the window, likely watching the activities of the soccer club on campus.

"So, I was thinking some kinda place where we could just take it niiiiice and easy just to relax or something…"

Isshiki's profile highlighted by the glare of the waning sun appeared somewhat anxious, but calm.

Although her tone was cheerful, she was showing concern for Hayama in her own way.

Oh. So you aren't being half-hearted about this, after all. I'm pretty sure you'd win over most guys if you showed them that side of yours…

"Doesn't sound like a bad idea," I said, finding myself smiling.

Then, Isshiki's face energetically lit up. "I know, right! So, that's why I'd like to talk about places you'd recommend!"

"Uh, isn't that your specialty?" I asked.

You're definitely asking the wrong people. Yuigahama could fall back on her friends for information, but Yukinoshita and I didn't give off the image that we'd know any decent places to go out and have fun.

Isshiki swelled her cheeks. "I already tried all the things I came up with before! That's why I'd like an opposite approach this time."

"Ahh, right…"

Amazing. Her ability to act was really amazing. Are you sure you aren't a member of TOKIO?

I sat there impressed and Yuigahama, sitting diagonally opposite of me, pressed her index finger against her chin and tilted her head. “So basically… you want us to think of a place where you can casually hang out without worrying about people?”

“Simply put, that’s exactly it, yep.” Isshiki nodded her head while answering Yuigahama’s question.

Yukinoshita sighed gently. “…Well, I suppose that’s fine.”

Her smile made her appear much more like an older sister than normal. Seeing Yukinoshita as someone who she could get along easily right now, Isshiki made a happy smile.

“Thank you very much…! Soooo, with that out of the way, senpai, what do you think?”

“Why ask me…”

I drew a blank. I was thinking about suggesting to her to just go to Destinyland for now, but that might’ve been a bit much for someone who was rejected there…

But well, I had no idea what Hayama’s interests were, but wouldn’t he just act as if he’s having fun regardless of what they did and where they went? Of course, whether he’s actually having fun or was just acting was another story.

While I was thinking, Yuigahama leaned forward from her seat. “Hi-Hikki, where do you think is good? Um, you know, just for reference…”

“We’re completely different, so I don’t think it’ll serve as one, you know,” I said.

Yukinoshita chuckled. “That’s true. You’re like his antithesis, after all.”

“Right?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

It felt like there was some form of ridicule in her agreement, but it didn’t offend me or anything.

In reality, it wasn’t wrong to call me his antithesis. I was quite proud of being a fairly high spec holder, but it was nowhere close to Hayama… But for me to be proud of this level of spec as if I was some kind of small accessory was I worthy to be Hayama’s antithesis?

Really, what the heck, what’s with this small-fry accessory…? But hey, girls liked small accessories and sundries, so maybe small-fry accessories might surprisingly be popular! Gotta be positive! Such and such thoughts occupied my head.

Yukinoshita lightly coughed. Then, she turned her face away and added hastily. “…But, it’s exactly because you’re his antithesis that I believe it will serve as a reference. If you take the exact opposite of the view of an antithesis, that can

be said to be nearly the correct answer. The opposition of opposition is agreement, right?"

"Don't you mean the opposite of opposite isn't necessarily the truth…?"

That's some funny logic. Opposition of opposition is agreement… this isn't Bakabon's Papa[9] *or anything…* was what I wanted to say, but Yukinoshita and Yuigahama were attentively staring at me, waiting for my answer.

Well, um, if you keep staring at me so seriously, I'm not going to be able to come up with anything, so please stop.

"…Uh, I'll try to think about it."

I managed to respond to them and covertly removed my gaze from them. Abruptly, I could hear a "phew" or "bleh" of disappointment and discontent.

"Please make sure to think it over then, okaaaay?" said Isshiki, smiling.

But that's where I'm stuck though… I'm already having trouble thinking for myself, let alone for Isshiki. In fact, I'm the one who wants to ask here… Well, whatever. I'll think it over next time.

In any case, Isshiki's changing attitude towards Hayama may have been due to the rumor. At the same time, Hayama's surroundings were seeing definite changes.

But how was it going for the other person in the storm?

"…Speaking of which, Yukinoshita, how about you? Has anything changed because of that rumor?"

"Me? There aren't very many people who would come near my class to begin with…"

That's true. Yukinoshita belonged to the class of International Cultivation, class J, which was located at the farthest end of school and was comprised ninety percent of girls. As a result, there was a unique air about them that kept people from proactively approaching them. So in that sense, she might've had it better off than Hayama.

But that didn't mean there wasn't any kind of influence at all.

Yukinoshita let out a short sigh. "Well, there certainly does seem to be people saying things secretly, but this isn't any different from before, so it's hard to judge…"

"I totally understand. When you stand out, people doooo say a lot of stuff behind your back."

No, in your case, Isshiki, I think it's a bit different…

Yukinoshita smiled and lightly nodded, adding further with a quiet voice. "…But it's not as horrible as it was back then."

"Back then". Those words nagged at me.

Her past that I was ignorant of. Or rather, her past she didn't speak of. And her past with him.

However, was it okay to ask about it? At the very least, in this situation where there were people present, I felt it wasn't something I could ask. Did I have the right to simply ask her about the things she didn't talk about?

While hesitating, I tried to speak.

And suddenly, there were several knocks at the door of the room. Everyone reflexively turned their eyes towards the door and I lost my timing to ask her.

The door was then opened without reservation, not waiting for our response.

"…Got time right now?"

It was a voice tinted with anger. With eyes shifting around the interior of the room and loosely rolled blonde hair shaking in displeasure, standing at the entrance was Miura Yumiko.

"Yumiko, what's wrong?"

"…I want to talk about something."

"Oh. Well, for starters, come in, come in." Yuigahama called out.

Miura nodded and took a step into the room. She then looked at Isshiki dubiously.

"Ah. Okay, I have student council work, so I'll take my leave here…" said Isshiki. She hurriedly left the room after being mindful of the mood.

"See you later, bye." She said with a small voice as she closed the door.

After seeing that, Yuigahama recommended a seat to Miura. We sat in a natural order of me, Yuigahama, and Yukinoshita facing Miura ahead.

"Did you want to talk about the mail?"

"No, not that… Well, there's that too." Miura looked away, mumbling her words in difficulty to Yuigahama's question. She then made a large sigh and for some reason, faced Yukinoshita next. "…Actually, is there something going on between you and Hayato?"

Her words and her gaze were sharp.

And surely enough, she was referring to the recent rumor. The irresponsible gossip concerning Hayama and Yukinoshita was originally just in the class, but was now being whispered throughout the school.

It's something I should've noticed when Isshiki barged in our club on the first day we resumed our activities. That also included the possibility that there were girls who went to check directly with Yukinoshita.

And for Miura who was in the closest position to Hayama, there's no way she thought nothing of it.

Miura's gaze burned up, but Yukinoshita took it coldly.

"There's nothing at all. We're just acquaintances from the past," Yukinoshita said, answering nonchalantly, but Miura's stabbing glare didn't loosen.

"You sure about that?"

Yukinoshita sighed tiresomely. "Do you think I have anything to gain from lying…? Things like that have always been a bother since a long time ago."

"Huh? What's with your tone? Talk about getting on my nerves. I really, really hate that part about you."

"Yumiko!"

The one who raised her voice in reproach was Yuigahama. Miura's shoulders twitched in surprise and she timidly shook her head.

Ahead of Miura's gaze, Yuigahama's lips distorted as if she was angry somehow and she brought up what they had discussed in class at some point. "I explained it before, didn't I? It really was just a coincidence and that nothing happened at all after that."

"…If that was everything, Hayato wouldn't be so worried. I mean… that's never happened before, too…" said Miura, her tone somewhat sulking and lacking its usual strength. She faced downwards and slightly bit her lips.

Perhaps, the person in the closest position to Hayama Hayato in this school was Miura. I wasn't sure of the length of their acquaintanceship, but they should've gotten friendly after becoming second years at least.

That's why any kind of abnormality in Hayama was clearly visible to her. I'm sure she had a far better understanding of him than I did.

But there were things that even Miura had no knowledge of.

The only one who knew those things at this moment in time was Yukinoshita Yukino.

Yukinoshita flicked away the hair at her shoulders and spoke coldly. "It's not like he's concerned for me. It's likely he's concerned about something else entirely."

"That… That just might be what you think, right? It's not like we know what Hayato's thinking about, anyway." Miura dropped her shoulders. While fiddling with her hair with her fingertips, she quietly checked with Yukinoshita, "…Like, wasn't there something like that? I mean, not now… but like, back then, or something." Miura spoke her words in fragments.

Those words that Miura uttered inarticulately.

They were things I had considered as a possibility while at the same time, excluded as if they weren't possible.

Yukinoshita doesn't lie. It's just that she doesn't say what's true. There're also times where she'd try to cover things up in an incoherent, roundabout way. I knew all of that.

In that case, what about Hayama Hayato? I knew absolutely nothing about what his feelings were, his heart, and his desires. It's not like I wanted to know either.

All this time, I'd say that, confident there's something between the two all the while trying not to think there was.

And right now, Miura was trying to touch upon that.

Yukinoshita, however, sighed and brushed it off. "…So what if there was something and I told you everything, would anything change? Would you or anyone believe it?"

Her pressing tone caused Miura to hesitate from answering. She strongly squeezed the cuff of her cardigan in contemplation, her lips trembling, but ultimately, her voice didn't come out.

Yukinoshita looked at her and made a shallow sigh. "In the end, it's meaningless."

Explanations, excuses, defenses, and the conversation weren't given any meaning.

As they say about the vulgar masses, the more people flock to a group, the more foolish they become. No matter how prominent an individual is, no, it's because he *is*prominent that he would be blotted out by the sheer force of numbers when thrown into that lump of people. Individual will, qualifications, and personality, let alone emotions aren't considered at all.

This was the inconsideration that Yukinoshita had tasted all this time.

We see only what we want to see, listen only to what we want to listen to, but for the things we want to say, we aren't able to. This is the society that we're living in right now.

But Miura was different.

"Every time… the way you act like that…!" She voiced her clear emotions of fury and stood up.

"Wait, Yumiko!?"

Yuigahama's voice of surprise to restrain her didn't make it in time. I stood up frantically as well, but Miura brusquely walked directly up to Yukinoshita, seeing only her.

"Just who do you think you are, seriously!"

Then, Miura violently reached out to grab Yukinoshita.

But her hand didn't reach Yukinoshita.

Yukinoshita quickly rose to her feet and caught Miura's hand that reached out to her collars. She then gave Miura a coldhearted look.

"…!"

"Unfortunately for you, I'm used to things of this nature… Though, you're the very first one to directly come at me like this."

They both glared at each other with their intense breaths and cold voices going back and forth. Miura made steady shallow breaths as if she was enduring something while Yukinoshita made deep, deep breaths.

"Is there anything else you want to say? Or is there a continuation of this?"

Miura gradually lost her energy while Yukinoshita's emotions increasingly swelled. It was as though they were transferring their passion between each other from their entangled gazes and held hands.

Yukinoshita wore an inhumane smile in provocation. *That's right. When she makes a smile like that, she's the splitting image of Haruno-san,* such an out of place thought sprung to mind.

However, it wasn't a smile that I wanted to look at for very long.

"Quit it already. For now, just let go and sit down."

I lightly patted Yukinoshita's hand that was still holding onto Miura's arm. I hesitated for a moment contemplating whether it was okay for me to touch her, but for Yukinoshita with her current belligerent attitude, it was better than using words.

Yukinoshita shot me a piercing gaze for an instant, but she obediently released Miura's arm. Miura then loosely dropped her arm and took a step back.

I entered the space that opened between the two and motioned to Miura without contact for her to go back. Yuigahama took over from there.

Yuigahama lightly tapped Miura's shoulders, still glaring at Yukinoshita bitterly, and had her take a seat.

"Just calm down for a bit… Okay?"

As I was watching those two, I moved my seat to a position that'd allow me to immediately get in between Miura and Yukinoshita.

"You okay?"

"Yes. Didn't I say so? I'm used to it."

Yukinoshita firmly clutched her hand that held Miura's arm and smiled bitterly at me. The aggressive emotion from earlier was gone.

"Yukinon…"

"It's not something I'm concerned with at this point… It's enough that the people I'm close to understand, so it's not a problem."

Yuigahama anxiously called to Yukinoshita and she made a powerless smile. She softly rubbed her hand that held Miura's arm again and she sat down. Once the situation had finally calmed down, Yuigahama sighed in relief and returned to her seat.

Miura had been watching those two quietly the entire time. She partly closed her eyes as if it was dazzling.

And then, she uttered, her lips only slightly trembling, with a whispering voice. "…That's normal, isn't it…? That's why."

"Eh?" Yuigahama asked.

Miura looked away. "The thing about close people… It's because I want to be that way that I want to know." Her mouth embarrassingly groped around as she added and she then brushed her hair. After, she turned her face away from us and tediously looked outside the window.

—-Yeah, so that's how it is.

Those words didn't have the slightest intention of properly getting something across to someone, yet I understood. I ended up understanding. To be more exact, it felt like it was something closer to empathy.

Yukinoshita wasn't the only one who was exposed to inconsideration.

I'm sure that he, who shared the same past, was as well.

It wasn't just that only one side was exposed to the twisted inconsideration. I'm sure the other side wasn't understood at all either.

"Miura. So what you want to know isn't what happened a long time ago, right…?"

I felt that my voice had some astonishment in it.

When I spoke, Miura sent me a glare. But her eyes that lacked its typical spirit glittered from moisture instead.

The things that she wanted to know likely weren't the things that happened in the past, let alone his future career path.

What was he thinking? What was he feeling?

All she wanted to know were his feelings.

She wanted to understand him.

"I-It's just… um. I just think it'd be nice if we could maybe stay together a bit longer, so… Um, together with everyone… as we are…" Miura tried to give her side of the story, slightly flustered, but her energy eventually withered away. Eventually, she stopped and slowly dropped her shoulders. "It's just Hayato's been distant recently… It's like he's going to go somewhere at this rate." Miura added to her words with an extremely small voice while gazing at the corner of the floor.

Exactly from what point “recent” was, I didn’t know. But the environment that enclosed Hayama Hayato was gradually changing.

Isshiki’s confession, or even the outing with Orimoto and her friend, girls from another school. And lastly, the rumor with Yukinoshita.

To this day, these stories associated with Hayama never came up. No, more accurately, he had detached himself from them. And now that balance was crumbling.

When they started to grow distant, talks about the class splitting up sprang up at the same time. They knew fully well that their unity would be lost in the future.

That parting and that feeling of distance were things Miura had indeed felt.

“I know this is weird even for me, but… I… just don’t get anything else.”

Yuigahama stood up and went next to Miura. She squatted down beside her and took her hands.

“It’s not weird. It’s not weird at all. Thinking that you want to be together is a really, really normal thing to do.” Yuigahama replied with a kind tone to Miura’s collapsing words.

Then, Miura let out a deep, deep breath and looked downwards. I could hear a quiet breathing that sounded as if she was holding back from sobbing.

I’m sure she knew that they couldn’t stay like this forever, that there were things that no matter how much she felt about the future wouldn’t be granted, and that the mere mention of something could destroy everything, but even so, she still didn’t want to lose them.

That’s why, at the very least, she wanted to be close, she wished to remain close, all so she could support Hayama Hayato, his surroundings, and his wish to be who he is.

That curt and unassuming mail. It was the one and only form of modest resistance that she could do. Packed in just that one sentence alone were her compelling feelings and wish.

But that’s exactly why there was something I didn’t understand.

I made one large breath and called out to her. “But look, Miura. If Hayama’s not telling you, doesn’t that mean he doesn’t want you to know? He might end up hating you.”

“Wait, Hikki!”

“Hikigaya-kun…”

Yuigahama looked at me critically while Yukinoshita looked at me, perplexed.

I was fully aware that it was a cruel question. But it’s something I still wanted to ask. It’s not like I wanted to know Miura’s resolve. Truthfully, I wasn’t interested in that at all.

It's just, I still wasn't confident whether taking a step over the line for someone who didn't wish for it was the right thing to do or not. I thought that you could build and maintain a relationship without going out of your way to concern yourself with it.

That's why, I asked. "Even so, do you still want to know?"

I questioned her, wanting to know whether she was okay with stepping over that line even if it meant being hated, being neglected, being called shameless, and hurting someone.

Miura didn't hesitate to answer.

She glared at me with teary eyes and squeezed her fist.

"I want to know… Even so, I want to know… because I don't have anything else."

Her eyes were moist, her voice trembling, but she, without a doubt, gave her answer.

Perhaps these feelings were always inside of her; the feeling of wanting to know, the feeling of wanting to understand. It's just that they're now pouring out in droplets as she desperately swallowed her trembling breaths.

If she knew that it was something that wouldn't come true, but still sought for it and opposed it.

Then, that was no different from someone out there.

"I got it. I'll do something about it."

It was my turn to answer immediately.

Yuigahama and Yukinoshita made slightly surprised faces.

"What do you mean do something about it…?"

"I force him to spit it out. If not, then I'll look into it and dig it up."

"Even if he does tell you, there's no proof that it's true."

"Yeah. So… I'll do some detective work after."

However, that probably wasn't enough.

I needed to properly understand why Hayama was being so logically stubborn about not wanting to tell anyone his career path. I'll probably need to take the proper steps towards doing that, but well, I'll think about it little by little.

Right now, what was important was Miura's determination.

"Whatever the case, it might not be fully accurate… but if you're fine with that, then I'll do something about it," I said once more.

Yuigahama looked at Miura's face and kindly spoke to her. "Yumiko, is that okay?"

“…Uh huh.”

After Miura replied with a tone as if she was a child, she sniffed her nose and rubbed her eyes with her sleeve. Because she had rubbed them so roughly, her eyes looked like the eyes of a panda.

However, after seeing her face with the crumbling makeup, I thought for the first time that Miura Yumiko was a cute girl.

Chapter 5

Until that day comes, **Totsuka Saika** is waiting.

It was a clear, winter day following Miura's visit to our club.

I listlessly walked outside for PE and the sky was bright. Judging from this weather, it looked like tonight was going to be a radiative cooled night.

But I was definitely grateful for this cloudless weather since I was going to be training for the marathon very soon. I was probably just going to laze around at home when it becomes night, so the temperatures dropping didn't really matter to me…

Three entire classes all came out onto the schoolyard. Similar to other activities during PE, the marathon training wouldn't be divided between the boys and girls. We would only be running, though the course that the boys and girls ran would be separate.

We formed an assembly at the fields and I caught sight of Miura in a group amongst the girls.

Since the morning, Miura seemed like she had been trying to keep me out of her sight. Be it during class or break, she'd always look away from me with her cheeks in hand. And during break, Yuigahama and Ebina-san would go up to her and chat about various things.

Although I did feel a little guilty for watching her so closely, she was much calmer than she was yesterday, though I wasn't exactly sure why.

After what happened, I went home first which was also meant to ease Miura. If a barely involved boy like me stayed the entire time, I doubt Miura would've found that comfortable.

So what they discussed afterwards were things I didn't know. Considering that Miura was breaking down in tears, I was skeptical of whether they were even able to hold a proper conversation.

In any case, isn't Miura-san just a little too weak to pressure…? Didn't she cry when Yukinoshita completely won their spat over summer…?

But while she may be weak, I thought she was strong-hearted as well.

"I want to know." Those few words continued to linger in my ears.

As I went to line up, I looked ahead.

Hayama Hayato was there.

Hayama was engaged in pleasantries with Tobe and the others, not aware that I was looking at them.

Or maybe he did notice, but was acting as if he didn't, just like how he did with other things.

In the first place, why was he refusing to tell people about his career path? It might be quicker to just dig out the reason why he was being so stubborn and make it meaningless than getting him to spit it out his choice.

As I stood there idly in thought, the PE teacher, Atsugi, finished his roll-call.

"Alrighty. Pair up with whoever you like and do some warm ups," said Atsugi, overbearingly.

Everyone then transitioned into forming pairs and beginning their warm ups.

Should I try pairing up with someone close to Hayama and probe him with some questions?
But who?

Was there anyone in this school who knew Hayama more than Miura? As for those who were closest, that would be Miura's group. Miura was also watching him very closely. People that were much closer than them were considerably limited in number, if any at all.

I needed to adjust my thinking. A paradigm shift, so to speak. What if I tried asking someone with a similar attribute and was also friendly with Hayama and trace his thoughts from there? For example, Totsuka who was also the president of a sports club or our classmate Totsuka. How about Totsuka that went to our school or a boy like… okay, I wasn't sure about that, but anyway, Totsuka. I couldn't think of a reason in particular, so let's go with Totsuka.

Mmkay, it's time for some warm-up exercises with Totsuka! I made eager looks around until I was called by someone.

"Hachimaaan!"

I spontaneously turned around. And then, our eyes met.

Lumbering his way in my direction over the surface of the field with a wave was Zaimokuza. *Why does he look so happy…?*

"Hachimaaan, let's get cracking on the warm ups!"

"Right… You make it sound like we're playing baseball here… Also, I'm pairing with someone else, so…"

I thought I'd voice my complaint to Zaimokuza, but he wasn't listening to me at all. As a matter of fact, he started off on a tangent.

"Hold it. The instructor most certainly did say to form a pair with someone you like, but that is not the reason why I came to the likes of you… S-So, don't misunderstand me, you hear?"

"Man, don't blush and look away, that's really creepy…"

I removed my gaze from Zaimokuza and made surveying looks around. Hayama, Tobe, Oooka, and Yamato had formed their respective pairs and were starting their warm ups. Damn it! Even Totsuka's in a pair, too! I was hoping to use this as an excuse to give Totsuka's joints a real smoothing, too…

"Fine…"

I gave up and settled for forming a pair with Zaimokuza. I stretched my body, or rather, relaxed it. After finishing that up, I had Zaimokuza sit and I pressed down on his back.

But there wasn't any meaning in doing these warm ups mindlessly. While I was at it, I decided to utilize my special skill of human observation.

I glanced to the side in Hayama's direction. But since his group was some distance away, I couldn't get a good view of them. I could only make out that he was wearing a refreshing smile, talking about something pleasant.

From my spot, I couldn't really hear what it was they were talking about. *I need to move closer…*

I leaned further forward with my weight and I completely pressed Zaimokuza down.

"Ow, ow, owowowow! Eeggk!"

When I heard his scream, I realized I had him in a forced posture and quickly got off of him. As a result, Zaimokuza collapsed to the floor on his back and convulsed in spasms.

There was a world of difference between us and them. I made comparing glances, but our side didn't have the slightest hint of a fun and talkative atmosphere. I ended up making a bitter smile.

Zaimokuza found that offensive. "Stop that, Hachiman. Do not go comparing us to the likes of them."

"Mm? Ahh. My bad."

"You will only be met with misery if you stack yourself against them, you know? They excel in their appearances, athleticism, and they are kind people who even remember my name. There is no need for self-abasement, Hachiman."

"Ehh, this was about me?"

I totally thought we were comparing Zaimokuza and Hayama here though?

With this considerable of a gap between us, of course you'd want to try comparing.

"Oh yeah, what're you doing for your career path?"

"It's exactly because you're his antithesis that it can serve as a reference" was what Yukinoshita said, I think? The thought crossed my mind and I tried asking.

“Humu?” Zaimokuza tilted his head and answered, still lying on the floor. “Me, you say? I am choosing the sciences.”

“Huh?”

“…What is with that look? Do you wish to lodge a complaint?”

“Nah, I thought for sure you were going to go with the liberal arts. Since you’re aiming to be a light novel writer, wouldn’t that be more convenient?”

“Naïve, you’re a naïve one!” Zaimokuza wagged his finger while purposely clicking his tongue.

How annoying… Could he go through a giant explosion[1] *or something…?*

“I tend to absorb information from the liberal arts within the scope of my interests. The problems are the fields which I have absolutely no interest in. Unless I drive myself to confront them, I will be unable to learn them…”

“…R-Right. You actually looked respectable for the first time ever.”

He had such an extremely, proper opinion that I was impressed for just an instant.

But a Zaimokuza that wasn’t trash just wasn’t Zaimokuza. Zaimokuza was Zaimokuza exactly because he relied on excuses, always turned his eyes away from reality, and eventually keeled over with his ideals in hand…

I*’ll treasure that Zaimokuza from now on within my heart. Farewell, Zaimokuza.* I quietly bid my goodbyes to the present Zaimokuza.

Zaimokuza started up his body and lightly brushed off the dirt. “Well, that is not to say I am a scholar in math and science…”

“You’re going to have trouble with the exams, won’t you?”

“Indeed. However… I, myself, am much worse with girls than I am with math and science…” Zaimokuza’s eyes turned distant and stated with a calm tone.

There was a tinge of enlightenment in his voice and it felt as if he had treaded upon the stage of self-effacement making me unable to interject.

Zaimokuza continued further. “I can feel at ease in the science classes. The fewer the girls, the more peaceful the room of academia is. Furthermore, the girls who choose the sciences are much nicer, no?”

“I’m not so sure about nicer, but… that’s true… you can think like that too, huh…?”

He opened my eyes to some possibilities. Certainly, the science classes were comprised of eighty percent boys. Fewer girls were likely to avoid that option.

As I processed that, Zaimokuza’s eyes lit up with violence.

“Hah! Those idiotic, liberal arts women from private institutions have such a glaring discrepancy between their standardized scores and IQ that they are not

worth the time! They should just spend their entire life pondering over the feelings of a writer on tests!" Zaimokuza spat out.

Just conversing with this authoritarian upholding his old-fashioned policies full of discrimination and prejudice made me feel at ease… What's with this sore loser…!? Zaimokuza, you were definitely better off this way!

But Hachiman thinks you should be wary because there's a tendency for girls in the sciences to become otaku princesses[2]! To be constantly stuck in an environment with countless numbers of boys, it most certainly wouldn't be strange for a girl to start being thought of as a princess. Normal girls would be elevated to science princesses just like how princess cells[3] were awakened from the kiss of a prince…

There was just something deplorable about Zaimokuza's reason for choosing the sciences, but well, I'm sure the first reason he gave was real. He, too, was unexpectedly giving it a lot of thought.

"The sciences seem pretty rough, but do your best."

"Indeedy, I don't need you to tell me twice. A wanderer, I will not become from failing my exams, nin-nin."

"You're going overboard with your speech there."

We quickly finished our remaining stretches, stood up, and went towards the starting point of the marathon. The other boys were already gathered there and we were considerably lined up far in the back.

Zaimokuza shot up his index finger and then pointed at me. "Hachiman… Accompany me!"

"Don't wanna."

You're not even a girl. Why exactly do I need to run with you?

Atsugi blew the whistle with a stopwatch in his hand. The front started off sequentially and we sluggishly began running after them.

I looked to the front and around, but everyone was lightly treading on. This was just training, so there shouldn't be anyone taking it seriously.

It was currently fourth period with lunch right after. If I used my energy here and ate, I was confirmed for sleeping through fifth period. Anyone would fall asleep in a heated classroom with a full stomach and exhausted from labor. I already sleep enough as it is in class even when I wasn't tired.

We apathetically jogged at the tail of the line and after a few minutes, Zaimokuza was already starting to slow down. *Really? Weren't you just going "—Do you think you can keep up with me!?" from behind moments ago…?*

"U-Ugh… The phenomena of Heavy Acceleration[4]… Th-The Heaviness is…"

"I'm going on ahead."

I shouted to Zaimokuza, left him there, and went ahead. Whenever someone told you to run together with him, it was proper etiquette to betray him midway. And in this way, children came to learn that they shouldn't trust people so easily…

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As I continued running by myself, I had cleared half of the assigned distance. Heke![5]Er, that was Hamtaro, wasn't it…?

The assigned distance for training in class was four kilometers. We ran around the circumference of the school. *Blehhh… if we keep running around and around like this, I'm going to turn into butter…*[6]

These insanely worthless thoughts filled my head until I eventually caught up to the middle group. It looked like commuting to school by bike everyday helped because I still had about half of my stamina left.

Although, this "middle" group was actually the people who had no motivation, comprising of everyone outside of the top group who wanted to finish as soon as they could to rest.

It was in this group that I spotted Tobe and the others.

This training probably wasn't the time for the people from the sports clubs to run normally. I didn't need to bother checking that they were running along with the group as well.

They'd chat with each other while occasionally hitting each other in the shoulders, poking each other's heads, and pointlessly compete by sprinting, engaging in delightful fun. If I was a class president with pigtails, I would've reprimanded them with "Hey boys, be serious and run!" They'd then tell me, "Shut it, ugly!" and I'd be in tears afterwards, leading me to denouncing them during the end-of-day meeting. Heck, I wanted them to thank me for not being a beautiful, pigtailed class president girl.

But the ones messing around were just the usual idiot trio, Tobe, Oooka, and Yamato. I couldn't see Hayama anywhere.

Good timing.

There were some things I wanted to ask these guys.

As I stalked the three Samba Carnival[7] idiots that continued to play around, I ran along right behind them. But it was fairly difficult finding the timing to speak to them as we were running. That's a lie! Hachiman, you lied to yourself just now! You wouldn't be able to grab onto that timing even if we had stopped running!

This is pretty hard since there isn't a signal of the sort to watch for… And as I was intently watching them like a rockbomb[8], Tobe stopped running.

"Go on without me."

Tobe squatted after shouting to Oooka and Yamato. It looked like he was tying his shoes.

That's good, the easiest guy to talk to stayed behind.

"Hey."

"Whoa!"

I stood behind Tobe and greeted him. Tobe fell over as if he was trying to perform a falling technique and turned towards me.

"God danggit, Hikitani-kun. Ya gotta let me know before ya jump on me like that. Freaked me the hell out there."

Uh, you're being a bit too aggressive for how freaked out you are… Well, let's just ignore Tobe's mumbling complaints and quickly ask him what I needed.

"Hayama isn't with you?"

"Ahh. Hayato-kun's runnin' seriously. Everyone's totally rootin' for him to win this year since he won last year."

"You don't say…"

So that's how it is. Our school's marathon was only separated by boys and girls, so that meant Hayama had won last year against the upperclassmen as well. That would explain why he'd be the obvious favorite to win this year too. By the way, I didn't even get placed as I was just a part of the finishing masses.

Well, that didn't matter.

I indicated ahead with my chin and moved my legs urging Tobe to run along. It'd be kind of odd to continue standing around here and there's no telling when a teacher would make his rounds around here. Going along with that, Tobe stood next to me and we began running.

After running for some time, Tobe tilted his head in puzzlement. He was probably finding it strange why I was running together with him. I wanted to get down to business as well.

But before I could, Tobe opened his mouth. He let out a sigh resembling a yawn of relief and showed me a miserable looking smile. "Yo, for real, when I heard that rumor, I totally freaked out. It's not like we can go sayin' it to people, ya know?"

"Huh?" I glanced at him with half-opened eyes wondering what he suddenly started off on.

Tobe wiped the sweat at his brow. "C'mon, Hayato-kun said the initial "Y", ya know? There ain't too many who know about it."

"……"

The abrupt mention of that caused me to react a moment late. But after gradually connecting the dots, a clear image came to mind.

It was on that night of summer.

In that dark room, the initial that he forced out, unable to endure the noisy and constant questioning of everybody's voices.

I recalled the event with Hayama and the others when we were at Chiba Village. And surely enough, at the time, Hayama had stated that the initial letter of the person he liked was "Y".

For just a brief moment of time, I thoughtlessly carried my legs forward and Tobe peered into my face in examination.

"We can't talk about somethin' like that right now, yeah?"

"R-Right…"

Aren't you the one who brought it up? Are you one of those guys? Are you the personal barber of a king or something? I'm not some kind of scream whatever you want hole, you know…

"I mean, you get that there's no way, but when you actually hear it, ya freak out normally, yeah?"

I found myself understanding what it was that Tobe wanted to say.

"…Well, there's no way."

Although it looked like I was agreeing with Tobe, I became worried I might've been actually saying something entirely different.

No, I didn't care about that. That wasn't what I wanted to hear.

Tobe, however, tried to continue on. To stop him, I brought up something light so I could control the direction of the conversation.

"Did you already turn in your questionnaire?"

"Nah, not yet. I've been thinkin' of the sciences, but Oooka and Yamato keep sayin' the liberal arts."

"You don't say…… Did you ask Hayama what he's going to pick?"

Luckily, he brought up the names of other people, so it made it easier for me to get to the point.

From what I could see, Tobe was the closest to Hayama amongst the guys. Hayama was relatively close with Oooka and Yamato too, but Tobe being in the same club should've given him a bigger advantage. Of course, that's my side of the story based on what I knew of them… I mean, I didn't know a single thing about Hayama's friendships.

When I asked Tobe, he brushed up his nape hair. "Nah, he's, like, think for yourself and wouldn't tell me anythin'."

"I see…"

Well, that was something I should've expected. In which case, I needed to take a different approach to collect information. Times like these were when Tobe's

happy-go-lucky attitude saved a lot of trouble. I asked him another question with the expectations he'd drop information like a villager from a RPG.

"Have you tried consulting with Hayama about your career path?"

"I did, yeah. I asked him about the good stuff in either of them, and like, he told me it'd get in my way of choosin' or somethin'?" Tobe profoundly sighed, surprisingly seeming to be truly worried over what he should do.

Our running pace dropped for just an instant. *Still, Hayama offered his usual advice like always… I can't tell if he's just being extremely reasonable or being harmless…*

"Well, they both have their good and bad points. Did you ask him for a recommendation?"

"He said that would mess with my judgment or somethin'."

"I see…"

He was thorough.

In reality, people who were easily influenced by the opinions of others also tended to take the words of individuals possessing imposing and charismatic character at face value. Those who ended up as the heart of people similarly to Hayama needed to be wary of the potential impact their remarks could have on others. Matters concerning interests, tastes, and fashion were trivial problems, but career paths and relationships could affect a person's life now or later. All was well if everything went without a hitch. But once things turned sour, even the charismatic people would be the target of resentment. Those who let the opinions and words of others dictate their own choices were people who easily faulted others.

But regarding the guy named Tobe, there wasn't any need to worry about him harboring a grudge against others.

Tobe had a contemplative face as we were running and he made a deep sigh, a long trail of white breath leaving his mouth.

"…But, it's like what Hayato-kun said."

His words were kind of abstract. But there was sincerity in his lack of words and his tone that wasn't for anyone's ears. He must've understood what it was that Hayama's words were telling him.

"…You trust him, huh?" I blurted out.

Tobe stared at me in amazement. "Nah, say what, that ain't it, I think? Well, ya know, Hayato-kun is a pretty reliable fellow or somethin'?"

Seemingly embarrassed from the word "trust", Tobe's face turned red from the cold or his shyness while trying to rephrase his words. *Hey, stop acting like that! I'm the one who's getting embarrassed since I'm the one that brought it up!*

Tobe hit his chest as if to get over his embarrassment and continued. “Nah, seriously, Hayato-kun’s totally helped me a ton of times. I’m totally sure about that.”

“That’s not something to be proud of…” I said.

Regardless, Tobe didn’t look ashamed. He groaned and repeatedly pulled at his nape hair. “Beeh, seriously, I’m indebted to the guy. Like totally.”

“Better pay him back eventually.”

“That’s totally it! Yeah… Well, I’m not so sure about that.”

His tone at first was frivolous, but the energy in it withered away as he continued speaking. Curious about his overly somber expression, I urged Tobe to go on with a look. Tobe then lightly scratched his cheeks.

“I talk to him about a lotta stuff… but Hayato-kun never really talks to me about anythin’ and even if he did, I probably wouldn’t get it,” said Tobe, grinning.

That grin of his was similar to the cold, dry wind that blew by from earlier. It was dry and somehow, lonely.

Since the silence afterwards was so awkward, I searched for words that I could possibly say and then suggested an idea. “…Yeah, think about this. He doesn’t have any problems, so that’s why he’s not consulting with you.”

“Totally that! Hayato-kun’s a total hotty, after all!”

“That’s kind of irrelevant here… Besides, you looked out for him at Destinyland, right? I’m sure that was pretty helpful for him back then, not that I’d know.”

“Totally that! Hayato-kun’s a total hotty, after all!”

This time his face had some relevance there… Must be tough having a pretty face.

It looked like talking had lightened Tobe up and his running pace increased. He’d mumble “cold, cold” to himself whenever the freezing wind blew by us.

Eventually, we could see Oooka and Yamato ahead of us. Apparently they lowered their pace, finding it strange that Tobe didn’t chase after them.

“A’ight, I gotta chase those guys, so I’ll be goin’ on ahead.”

“Yeah,” I said, briefly.

Tobe made a chopping motion with his hand and made a wild sprint forward. He yelled out to Oooka and Yamato as he ran after them while waving. When the two of them saw him coming, they ran further ahead while going “Crap, here he comes!”, “Let’s get outta here!”

As long as Tobe was having fun chasing those two running away, that’s fine, I suppose…

But originally, there should've been one more person in that group. If he didn't have to carry the luggage of expectations, I think he would've been laughing along with them.

After that thought went by in my head, I suddenly regretted the words I carelessly uttered earlier.

Because he didn't consult with anyone, he didn't have any problems; there's no way that'd be true.

× × ×

The chime for lunch sounded.

When marathon training occupied PE, we were allowed to go straight to lunch after we were done. I could take my time to change and I could still easily be the first one to the school store.

I carefully picked my choice of bread among the many that were available and went directly to my usual lunch spot. Eating outside during this season meant dealing with the painful cold, but in the classroom with heating and full of people, I had no place. As a matter of fact, I recently had a gander at my seat during lunch the other day and my desk had a grocery bag on top of it and was being utilized as a trash dump. Remaining at my seat meant obstructing the public!

With that consideration in mind, I went to my designated spot located on the first floor of the special building. I took a seat on the stairs diagonally behind the school store, next to the school infirmary. From here, I could get a view of the tennis courts.

The steady rhythm of popping filled the transparent air of winter. The tennis club was using their lunch to practice. To this day, it was usually Totsuka who'd be practicing during lunch, but there must've been an upcoming tournament because the number of people had increased.

I chewed the bread I carried to my mouth all the while observing their practice. Totsuka, who had been looking after his club members the whole time, noticed me, shouted to them, and came over here with something in his hands.

"Yo," I said.

"Yeah, yo!" Totsuka answered, raised his hand similarly, and felt embarrassed.

"You sure about practice?"

"Oh, sure. I thought now's a good time as any to eat lunch," said Totsuka, and he showed me his lunchbox bag.

I felt a bit awkward since it felt like I had interrupted his practice… And to think he'd actually go out of his way just to eat with me… Crap, I'm blowing through the stages like they're nothing… At this rate, reaching the LOVESTAGE![9] was only a matter of time…

I scooted over to the side and made some space. Totsuka gave me a polite "Thank you" and took a seat as my neighbor… Fuahaha! Just look at this high level technique! By making space for a person preemptively, you could control where he would sit!

At the corner of my eyes, Totsuka began to unload his small lunchbox. I made a glance towards the tennis courts and the other members were also taking a break for lunch.

"Other members are practicing during lunch now, huh?"

"Yep, there's going to be a newcomer tournament soon, so I invited everyone… Oh, how about it, Hachiman? Want to practice with us? If you start now, you'll be able to make it in time for the summer tournament!" Totsuka asked in jest, pumping his fists up and down.

Oh gosh, what is this? So cute. I'm sorry, please give me this child named Totsuka. In fact, I'm on the verge of becoming his.

"Let's see, it depends on how many days a week practice is…"

"Hey, you're not being serious, are you?" Totsuka leaned forward and looked into my face.

Totsuka's hair gently rustled. His eyes that peeked out from between the cuts of his bangs had a mischievous glitter and his smile was strangely alluring.

"Yeah, it's a joke."

"I knew it." Totsuka displayed a deliberate show of dropped shoulders and disappointment.

A smile spilled on our faces. We both knew that was out of the question, allowing us to poke some fun at it… W-Well, I was actually pretty darn serious the first time he invited me though!

"…But, yeah. You're doing pretty well as the president, huh?"

"I feel like I'm still totally far from being called one though." Totsuka smiled anxiously with a chuckle.

I suppose it was a mixture of the truth and his modesty. But in his long time service as the president, he had proactively engaged in practice by himself. I'm sure that was much more telling to the members than words could ever be.

This was how a club president should be. I felt a certain club president out there could learn a thing or two from this… Though I guess it wasn't a big deal since she could usually strike a balance…

Suddenly, the phrase "club president" hit me.

My initial thought of finding a way to pry into Hayama's thoughts was to ask Totsuka about it. But due to my impure motive of wanting to talk to Totsuka and Zaimokuza hampering me, I totally forgot about it…

Besides, I was interested in Totsuka—I mean, in Totsuka's career path anyway.

"Totsuka. Which are you doing? Liberal arts or the sciences?" I asked.

Totsuka made a blank expression that Bambi would make upon jumping out from the meadows. "It's kind of rare for you to ask something like that, Hachiman."

"Really?" I asked back, finding that surprising.

Totsuka asserted without hesitation or confusion. "Uh huh. It feels like the things you're interested in are set or something."

Ahh, right, when he put it like that, that's true.

For many years, there were many times where I had reasons and excuses prepared since I'd never proactively try to communicate with people. Actually, if I didn't make a reason to talk to people, I wouldn't be able to say the things I wanted to say as freely as I'd like. In other words, ironically, loners could be said to be people with a strong sense of purpose, indeed.

As I sat there convinced, Totsuka, without answering my question, asked, "How about you, Hachiman?"

"Liberal arts for me."

Normally, I would've sentenced him a trip to the Lecture Room[10] for answering a question with a question, but I had no choice but to answer instantly with how he was bending his head to the side and gazing at me with his big eyes. Had this been Komachi or Isshiki, I would've taught them only after the lecture. Dang it! In the end, I was just teaching them! I'm super sweet!

Totsuka placed his chopsticks down and looked up at the sky. In the time he appeared to be thinking, the cold wind blew by and rustled Totsuka's bangs.

"Oh okay… Maybe I'll do that too…"

"Ohh, yeah…! Then again, are you sure you should be choosing like that?"

In that instant, the phrase "we're matching, huh?" voiced by Totsuka (shy gesture included) played itself in my head, and my heart was just about to dance with an encore just about to heat up[11], but somehow, I managed to keep myself at bay.

"You should probably think about it more… If we end up together though, that'd be nice too." I added, lightly coughing.

Totsuka placed his index fingers together and peeked at my face. *Um, see here, if you look at me like that, I might just want to say "heck, let's not stop at the liberal arts, let's go to the grave together!"…*

"For the most part, I did give it some thought… It's just the place I want to go to allows us to take exams for subjects in the liberal arts, too."

“Ahh. Well, there are a lot of subjects to choose from, after all.”

If there were evaluation standards like that in place, then it may not matter what you decided to choose. Picking between the liberal arts and the sciences through subject tests instead of the traditional process of your desired department was certainly an option.

For the liberal arts at private schools, the subjects were English, Modern Japanese, and social studies. For the sciences, the most standardized were English, mathematics, and science subjects.

But in recent years, you were given free rein to take subject tests of system A or system B depending on the university and department. There were many cases where you could even take math and science subjects at liberal arts departments depending on the selection process. Furthermore for public schools, many colleges imposed a curriculum beyond the five subjects and seven courses taught at study centers, so it’s necessary to study every subject.

It’s a simple matter of picking the liberal arts or the sciences if you just followed the custom of the schools you were interested in. On the other hand, there were a variety of school combinations to choose from. Anticipating Hayama’s choice from this angle would be too complicated.

“Where’s the school you want to apply to, Totsuka?”

“Um… I was thinking of either Tokorozawa’s School of Human Sciences or Sports Sciences[12].”

“Ahh, that place, huh?”

The school Totsuka said he was interested in going to was one that I knew. It’s a considerably famous college, but if you enrolled there, you’re stuck listening to the wind and eating Jumangoku Manju[13] for four years… Saitama Prefecture, talk about scary…

Nevertheless, it’s impressive that he’d go to a remote place like Saitama with things he wanted to do. In my case, if possible, I didn’t want to leave Chiba at all and I was set on riding only the Sobu Line local service.

“Did you consider the sports one because you’re in tennis?”

If the subject exams were necessary, then the reason for applying to a school should be related to the things you wanted to do. In that case, I should try examining things from that side.

When I asked Totsuka, he bashfully scratched his cheeks. “Mmm, that’s not it. I figured since I’ve been doing tennis for so long, I’d try for something related to it or something…”

“I see… Aren’t there recommendations for that?”

He’s been doing tennis for a long time, so he should at least be rewarded for it. Striving in your clubs and properly studying at the same time seemed like quite the

ordeal. Also, since the school Totsuka was interested in was rather popular, even if he retired from club now and began earnestly studying, there'd still be an immeasurable gap between him and those who had done so since the beginning. From the standpoint of a person like me, if you're going to the same place, then you might as well just opt for somewhere else that took less effort.

Already considering the pros and cons of the recommendations, Totsuka cheerfully smiled. "Ahaha, there aren't very many of those. I don't think it's possible with our school. Even if I did get a recommendation, I don't think it'll be for a very well-known university."

"Is that how it works…?"

It's true that I don't recall any strong clubs at our school. If there's one thing that came to mind, it'd be that senpai from Judo club I met during the summer. Supposedly he went to university on a recommendation, but I had no recollection of ever asking which university it was. While I was at it, I had no recollection of ever asking for his name either. Putting that aside, that senpai looked like he was having a lot of trouble, so it wasn't necessarily greener on the other side with recommendations.

I guess the best way is to just take exams normally and pass it on the first attempt, I concluded.

Totsuka chewed his steamed shrimp dumpling and hit his knees. "Ah. But amazing people might try going through a selection process for a famous school. You could also apply directly."

"Selection process… That rings a bell."

I recall that if you won three times at a card game, your wishes would be granted and you would become an Eternal Girl… oh wait, that's Selector[14]. Basically, the selection process was where you took a special selection test.

Totsuka nodded, but his expression grew gradually complex. "Right, right. But people who normally do that tend to be people aiming to be pros or Olympic athletes… The only person at our school who could pass would probably be just Hayama-kun."

"…Really, is he that amazing?"

"It's just an example. I'm sure it's actually much harder than that." Totsuka played it off by sticking out his tongue. He shifted his gaze towards the school grounds, the direction where the soccer club practiced after school

"In Hayama-kun's case, he'd be more likely to pass by applying directly than with a sports recommendation, right? He's the one who's coordinating the club president meetings, too."

Direct application. In other words, the AO entrance exams[15]… I believe the formal name was AO "Airheads are OK" entrance exams, I think? No? That was

an option too and so at that point, the relationship between the subject exams and choosing between the liberal arts and sciences was even weaker.

"Hayama's pretty amazing…" I expressed an obvious and natural impression of him.

"Yeah. He can do everything and he's nice, too."

I thought I had a fairly good grasp of Hayama's qualities, but I had never looked at him from the perspective of clubs. For Totsuka who also served as the president of a sports club, there's a side of Hayama that he could see. Totsuka abruptly clamped his chopsticks and made a troubled smile.

"Speaking of amazing… so is that rumor."

"Ahh, that…"

It should've been expected, but the rumor had made it to Totsuka as well.

"I was totally surprised when I heard it. I was under the impression Hayama-kun liked Miura-san. We did talk about it during over summer that one time…"

As Totsuka mentioned, when we were at Chiba Village over summer, Totsuka was also present when Hayama uttered that initial. Miura's first name certainly did start with the initial "Y".

But during PE, Tobe never touched on that possibility at all. As someone who was part of Hayama's group and watched them very closely, he must've saw it for what it was; that is, it wasn't likely.

—-If so, whose initial did it belong to?

"Hachiman? Is something wrong?"

When he called me, I noticed I was wrinkling my brow quite a bit. I forcibly moved my brows up and down, loosening my cheeks while I was at it.

"No, I was just wondering whose initial it was. There's a lot of people with 'Y' initials here…"

Isn't Yoshiteru Zaimokuza a prime example? How about the dark horse, Yamato? Heck, we should just change Isshiki's name by adding the "Y" sound and make it "Isshiki 'Bribe' Wairoha". It sounded like she could be suspected of bribing or something… Actually, the initial in this case is W, not Y. I had these idiotic thoughts and purposely drove them out of my head.

While we were talking, the chime marking the end of lunch sounded. I needed to make it back to class before the first warning bell. *Crap, I didn't even finish my food.* I hastily ate up my bread and washed it down with MAX COFFEE. Totsuka seemed to have been a light eater as he already finished his lunch and slowly got to his feet.

He turned towards the tennis courts and yelled. "Hey guys, it's time to go! I'll see you again after school!"

When the tennis club members responded back with the wave of their rackets, Totsuka did so with his hand. I gazed at him in a stupor. How should I put it? It wasn't very often you got to see Totsuka look so energetic and proactive.

"…Doesn't suit me?" Totsuka glanced at me in embarrassment, remembering that I was still here.

"Ah, no, that's not it, er…"

I stumbled over my words, surprise not being the only reason. The sight of him like that was just simply captivating. Unlike what Totsuka had done to this day, I felt this moment was when my heart was moved the most.

"It's just, I didn't know, uh, how president-ish you were, so I was just a bit surprised," I said in shambles, unable to properly put what I was feeling into words.

Finding that funny, Totsuka laughed. "There sure are a bunch of things you don't know, Hachiman."

"Yeah, there really is too many."

When Totsuka smiled, a smile broke onto my face as well. He then abruptly looked up to the sky and folded his fingers, counting something. "Like about the tennis club or about the sports recommendation…"

"Yeah, thanks for telling me about them," I said.

Totsuka nodded back and folded two more fingers. "And… about Hayama-kun's career path, or about that rumor."

When he brought those two up, I didn't have anything to say. In reality, I really didn't know a single thing about Hayama's career path. I couldn't gather much information even after indirectly asking Tobe and Zaimokuza about theirs. As for the rumor, I pretended as if it didn't exist.

A silence hung over us as I sat there unable to answer. The only audible noises were the blowing of the cold draft and the audible commotion coming from the school building.

Totsuka inhaled in the winter air and folded his remaining pinky, clenching his hand into a fist. "And also… about me, too."

Somehow, I was strangely satisfied with that.

Totsuka adjusted his hair that swayed from the wind with his fingertips and then puffed his chest out. This was the first time I had seen Totsuka like this, a Totsuka that I didn't know.

"I'm doing pretty well, see…? I might not be as reliable though." Totsuka added while making a bashful smile.

That was a gesture of the Totsuka Saika that I thought I knew.

That's why, perhaps, I think this was the first time I was able to properly look at the boy named Totsuka Saika; nothing more, nothing less. But by no means did that mean I knew him fully.

But that's exactly why I felt I wanted to know more.

"…No, that's not true. Even I'm relying on you. I still don't really get it, but… but, uh, I'll probably rely on you," I said.

I rose to my feet and took a step towards Totsuka.

Regardless of his embarrassment, Totsuka strongly nodded.

I think Totsuka had always been waiting for me for all this time, waiting for me to approach him just like I was now.

In this way, we'd gradually pull off our masks, whittle down our flesh, and be able to face each other for the very first time.

If there are times where we at first didn't take notice of each other and thus making us completely indifferent, allowing us to relentlessly throw out insults, then there, too, is a relationship that dwindles away little by little as if you were peacefully and leisurely chipping away and nibbling at the cuticles of your fingers.

Totsuka wasn't an angel… but more like a devil? Or an archangel… No, maybe a fallen angel?

Whatever he was, Totsuka was Totsuka.

Chapter 6

Gallantly, **Yukinoshita Haruno** drives away the time.

In the end, a few days had gone by and I had yet to hear anything worthwhile regarding Hayama's career path aside from the voices of my restless classmates.

In observing Hayama's group, they spent their unchanging days like before. Miura, perhaps even Tobe, stayed beside the existence that was the heart of their group without blatantly growing distant, staying mindful of him yet staying out of his way.

There wasn't much time left to resolve the consultation we had accepted from Miura.

The final deadline to submit the Prospective Career Path Questionnaire was at the end of the month, just before the marathon. Before then, I needed to find some kind of answer regarding Hayama's career path.

Presently, the only thing I knew was that Hayama hadn't told anyone of his career path. That's it. For now, my sole option was to gather material to make conjectures.

I spent those few days in that manner and drawing closer was the marathon as well as the opening of the new week after school.

After inspecting the state of the class, I went into the hallway. The situation was in a stasis, stagnating. Yuigahama was also proactively chatting with Hayama and the others in the small timeframe before they had to go to club, making her own investigative efforts.

In which case, there shouldn't be any issues with me heading alone to club today. When I left the classroom, I walked down the solitary hallway that led to the special building.

And further ahead, Hiratsuka-sensei was lightly motioning me to come over.

"On your way to club?"

"Well, yes."

"I see. You came at a good time. I was planning on going there as well," said Hiratsuka-sensei. She pointed in the direction of the special building and started ahead as if prompting me. It looks like she planned to discuss something with me as we walked.

If she's visiting our club, I suppose she wants to talk about work… As despondent as I was, there wasn't any merit in going against her. I obediently followed along.

“Are you available tomorrow after school?”

“As far as I know, yes.”

In truth, I didn’t have any arrangements of the sort. For the most part, there was Miura’s consultation, but it’s not like I had anything specific to do regarding it.

Frankly, I was at an impasse.

I was on a successive series: Eavesdropping on the conversations around me (stalking), carefully scrutinizing Hayama’s actions (stalking), fumbling around for the timing to catch Hayama by himself (stalking), only for everything to be in vain (strike). With the cutoff for submitting the Prospective Career Path Questionnaire in mind, it’s only a matter of time until game and set, let alone three outs.

Hiratsuka-sensei, either satisfied with my response or assumed I didn’t have any plans in the first place, moved the conversation along in disinterest.

“Tomorrow, there’s an academic and career center, but it looks like we’re a bit short of helping hands… The student council is working pretty hard, however.”

You don’t say. Isshiki looks like she’s screwing around, but she’s actually doing her work properly.

“…And there, a nomination came from Isshiki. It seems she wants you to help them with the work.”

Is Irohasu’s order me?[1] *The word “work” isn’t exactly causing my heart to bounce up and down though…*

“So why go through all the trouble with you, sensei…?”

Isshiki was already pointlessly loitering at our room, so she could’ve just asked then.

“It’s because it’s a formal order from the student council,” said Hiratsuka-sensei, nodding. “Well, it means she’s growing if she sought permission from an advisor. I don’t know what her intentions are, but human resources that can be freely utilized without any issue fit you guys perfectly, so it’s a logical decision.”

It looks like Hiratsuka-sensei was seeing the growth of Isshiki in her own way… No, this was definitely Isshiki’s plan: She went through sensei, so we couldn’t refuse. But well, if Isshiki was putting a lot of her own effort into it, then I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to help her for a little bit.

“Well, if that’s all, that should be okay… But what exactly do you do at an academic and career center?”

“In a nutshell, it’d be discussing test-taking strategies. Think of it as something where you can direct specific questions to your upperclassmen.”

“It’s rather early to be preparing for tests, don’t you think? I mean, why start now…?”

“We should have gone over this during homeroom.” Hiratsuka-sensei’s expression turned indignant.

...Speaking of which, I think we did talk about that in class. I wonder if I just missed it… Ahaha… I forced out a dubious smile and played it off.

Hiratsuka-sensei left the matter alone and sighed briefly. “It’s because our school offers the International Liberal Studies course. There are kids who wish to study abroad as well. Those kids in particular need to prepare as early as possible, so we may be much earlier than general schools.”

“Study abroad…”

True enough, career paths weren’t limited within domestic borders. But I never gave it much thought since it seemed too good to be true, but there certainly should’ve been people who were sought to continue with higher education overseas. One characteristic of our school was offering an International Liberal Studies course. As such, the choice to study abroad was much more palpable.

Studying abroad, huh…? That’s amazing… I went overseas on a trip before, but I’ve never thought about living over there.

At the very least, it wasn’t something you should be rash about. That meant those who wished to study abroad might’ve decided on it considerably far in advance.

“I suppose there are a lot of people who have already decided, huh? I hear there are people who already turned in their questionnaires, too…”

“No, that’s not true. It’s just a handful of people that did. We did say the deadline was at the end of the month. It’s times like these when people turn in things at the very last minute… Ahh, Hayama did come to turn his in, though.”

“You don’t say…”

For his name to pop here was just my luck. Now I don’t need to bother with carefully constructing a conversation as a lead-in to ask about him, I thought.

However, Hiratsuka-sensei gave me a fixed stare with sidelong eyes.

“You won’t get anything from me since it’s personal information.”

“…I-I-I-I-I-It’s not like I wanted to know or anything.”

“Well, it’s understandable. Your curiosity gets the better of you when it comes to wanting to know about the schools people around you are interested in. It’s also an entertaining topic until it’s time for the actual exams.” Hiratsuka-sensei smiled as if feeling nostalgic from days past. She then continued. “Students like Hayama and Yukinoshita in particular are the center of attention even amongst the teachers. It’s a matter concerning the school’s accomplishments as well.”

“Huh, they have quite the expectations, don’t they…?”

“Your liberal arts grades aren’t anything to sneeze at either… But the disparity in attention is baffling,” said Hiratsuka-sensei.

She puffed her cheeks and seemed slightly upset, but well, that’s just the way the cookie crumbles. To this day, I had yet to develop a favorable relationship with a teacher. Because of that, despite receiving good scores on exams, the grades that showed up on my report cards always seemed to be lacking something. *I will never, ever understand why teachers found the blubbering (lol) punks in middle school to be more likable…*

While engrossed in my unpleasant memories, Hiratsuka-sensei suddenly stopped. She brushed aside her long hair and looked straight at me.

“What do you plan on doing?”

“I’m choosing the liberal arts,” I said, immediately replying.

Hiratsuka-sensei shook her head. “No, no, I mean after that.”

“Full-time house-husband.”

The instant I answered, my head was lightly chopped. Hiratsuka-sensei placed her hand on her waist in resignation and gave me a scrutinizing stare. It lacked her usual overbearing attitude, but made her look more like an onee-san, making me feel a little uneasy. Then, she sighed. “Look at reality.”

I-It’s not like I’m running away from reality, it’s just that I’m facing my dreams… But saying this would’ve been too much for Hiratsuka-sensei’s earnest gaze.

I scratched my cheeks, looked away, and answered, “I still haven’t decided yet. Besides, it’s not like I have a specific career in mind and I don’t really want to take up a research position either, so I believe choosing the liberal arts isn’t a problem.”

“Do you have anything you’re interested in?”

“If it’s something I’m interested in, it’ll be a hobby. Doing something you like for a living sounds painful to me.”

“Life is hard!” At least, I think that’s what the “Jinsei”[2] CM said. It really gave off the vibe that “life is too damn hard!”

“…That’s very like you, Hikigaya. Well, you do have a point as well. In reality, if we’re talking about your future being largely influenced by your undergraduate program, then that isn’t true for most people.” Hiratsuka-sensei crossed her arms and looked outside the window. “There are people who go on to publishing from a university of sciences while there are people who enter the entertainment industry with a degree in sociology. There are even people who advance to universities for foreign language study and then wander the world. People who attended law school aren’t necessarily all going to become lawyers or prosecutors. As a matter of fact, it’s not like I was enrolled in the department of

education myself. Anyway, doctors, lawyers, and researchers aren't the only ones…"

"Right. Pharmacists too…" I said.

Hiratsuka-sensei nodded.

It's certainly not always the case that your future occupation would have any correlation with your undergraduate program. I mean, look at my pops. He graduated from some incomprehensible undergraduate program and was doing some incomprehensible job. Wait, there's a correlation there…

Nowadays, there's an apparent distinction between the liberal arts and the sciences and they're even saying to consider things from an interdisciplinary perspective. Even companies seemed to be taking risks and were hoping for a different system of human resources.

In the end, a person's qualifications and skills were large assets. For example, communication ability or communication ability, also, communication ability. These communication abilities should've been deemed necessary by society. *Aww man, I don't want to think about job hunting.*

"But well, as a teacher, this is something I need to inform you of…" said Hiratsuka-sensei, and she patted my shoulders. "There's no need to determine your entire future now. If you want, you can transfer to other colleges, change your department, or even wait until you are accepted into a better college. Changing your career is possible, too. This is merely just one opportunity amongst the numerous choices available to you."

"I see."

I'm sure there were many chances to determine your path. It didn't matter whether it was with your post-education or your career. So in other words, marriage was one of the opportunities among those choices, right!? I couldn't say for sure whether that opportunity existed or not though! For me or for sensei!

But that really just amounted to having the chance to choose again. There's no guarantee you'd be able to take back any of your failures. You just might end up failing more and increasing your pain.

"…But wouldn't it be bad if your first choice was a mistake?"

"Indeed. That's why what teachers can do is increase those options…" said Hiratsuka-sensei. "And also, decrease them."

"Is it really okay for you to decrease them?" I asked.

Hiratsuka-sensei made a complicated expression.

"Of course, the one making the final call is the student. At best, we can only offer advice. So for the time being… you need to hurry up and give up on your dream of being a full-time house-husband."

Ahh, she just threw that option out the window… My options…

Eventually, we finished crossing the long hallway and approached the stairs. I was planning to climb them, but Hiratsuka-sensei was going to turn the corner. It looked like she wasn't coming along with me to the club. Her job was done after delivering Isshiki's request.

Hiratsuka-sensei lightly raised her hand and began walking away from me. I nodded in response.

Then, she stopped her legs and turned her head towards me.

"…If you end up going with the teaching profession in university, how about considering that? Surprisingly, you might fit the role perfectly."

"Definitely not, there's no way I could be a teacher. That means I'll have to deal with a student like this." I shrugged my shoulders and answered.

Hiratsuka-sensei wryly smiled. "Point taken. I can agree with you on that."

…You're one to talk, being the busybody that you are.

I nodded my head one final time and watched Hiratsuka-sensei off.

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In opening the door, my eyes met exactly with Yukinoshita's.

With a blanket covering her lap, she held a book wrapped in a cat cover that she seemed fond of, but her gaze was occupied by the door.

It looked like Yuigahama had yet to arrive, so Yukinoshita was alone. She softly smiled at me.

"Good afternoon."

"Sup."

After I replied, Yukinoshita closed her book and stood up. She then started on her tea preparations as always.

As the water boiled, Yukinoshita took out two teacups and spoke to me.

"It seems you're a little late today."

"Hiratsuka-sensei had some sort of request or something…"

Yukinoshita loaded the pot with tea leaves and tilted her head in puzzlement.

"Request?"

"She said there's an academic and career center of the sort tomorrow and that the student council needs some help."

"I see. The student council… I'll free up my schedule then," said Yukinoshita.

"Yeah." I found myself responding naturally due to her exceeding nonchalant answer. "…Uh, wait, it's fine if I'm the only one who goes."

Considering that I was the only one who was nominated, it's probably just menial labor like setting up chairs. There's no need to trouble Yukinoshita and Yuigahama over it.

Despite what I said, Yukinoshita showed no signs of concern and immediately replied, "I don't really mind… It's not like I have anything else in particular that needs to be done."

"Well, that's true…"

I was at a dead end, but that's not to say Yukinoshita had any specific plans herself. It's really shameful considering what I blurted out to Miura, but this was our current situation. So doing something to occupy ourselves might allow us to relax a bit.

We both went quiet after that, the sight of the pot boiling the water occupying our eyes. As we waited for it to finish, the door was vigorously opened.

"Yahallo!"

"Hallo, hallo~."

They were familiar and characteristic greetings.

First, it was Yuigahama. Next, entering the room after her was Ebina-san.

"Good afternoon, Ebina-san."

"Hello there, we haven't seen each other since the New Year, huh~?"

Yukinoshita politely recommended a seat to Ebina-san to which she thanked her and sat. While Yukinoshita prepared a serving of tea for our visitor, I looked at Yuigahama seeking an explanation thinking, *Now then, why is this missy here, I wonder…?*

Yuigahama nodded. "Remember? We were talking about how we should check with people who might know what Hayato-kun's career path could be, right?"

"Yeah."

"So that's why I talked about it with Hina and we figured we might as well think it over with everyone here. Right, Hina?"

"I hope I'll be useful though~."

Yuigahama kicked off the conversation and Ebina-san made an anxious nod.

Well, not a bad decision. Ebina-san occupied a relatively intimate position when it came to Hayama and Miura's relationship. She wasn't someone I, or even Yukinoshita, could simply ask by ourselves, but it could work if Yuigahama was mediating.

Also, Ebina-san may be hiding under the guise of a rotten girl, but she also had a mysterious side to her. Even if we missed the answer, we might stumble across some kind of hint.

However, Ebina-san's expression was cloudy. Her glasses were also fogged up by the tea she had accepted from Yukinoshita.

"Hayato-kun's career path, huh…? Can't say I've heard anything about it myself. That, and Hayato-kun's good in both subjects, so it might be hard to say."

"Ahh, I thought so. That's true…" Yuigahama dropped her shoulders and agreed.

Well, as long his grades weren't as lopsided as mine, narrowing down his career path from an academic perspective may be difficult.

It might be pessimistic to think of avoiding things you weren't good with, but it fit me to a T. But well, that didn't mean it applied to everyone out there.

With my cheeks in hand, I sighed.

Ebina-san continued to think. Looking like something came to mind, she opened her mouth.

"Oh, but, I think he might've said something about types of occupations."

"Eh, what, what? Did he really say that?" asked Yuigahama.

Ebina-san nodded. "This was a while back, but it was during the workplace visit. I think he said something about the mass media or foreign capital groups or something?"

"Ahh, right, he might've mentioned that." Yuigahama clapped her hands together.

Upon mentioning it, I certainly did get the feeling he did say something along those lines back then. But be it mass media or foreign capital groups, they were still too broad. It's not like the liberal arts made it easier to enter the mass media and foreign capital groups weren't limited to just one industry. It's a fool's errand trying to work backwards from there.

"However, those may be just things he said out of curiosity. That may be a little too weak to serve as a starting point," said Yukinoshita, placing her hand on her chin.

She was absolutely correct. As reality turned out, the place we ended up going to during the workplace visit was a completely unrelated IT firm anyway.

But Ebina-san seemed to have understood that as well.

"Yep, I have the same opinion. It's just…" Ebina-san abrupt stopped speaking. Her gaze was directed at the corner of the room, looking at no one in the room.

"It's just…?" Yuigahama urged her to go on.

Ebina-san lightly shook her head. "It's just, everyone ended up going to the same place, so I don't think it's going to be much of a reference!"

"Ahh, that's true," said Yuigahama.

Ebina-san uttered her lasting words unnaturally and Yuigahama nodded her head. However, I sat there unable to nod mine. Just now, what was it that Ebina-san really wanted to say?

Yukinoshita crossed her legs over again and asked Ebina-san further, “Did he say anything else?”

“I don’t recall anything else particularly related…” Ebina-san cocked her head in puzzlement as if searching through her memories, but her gaze then turned to me. “Oh, but hey, maybe HIkitani-kun might know when it comes to little things like that, right?”

“Huh? Me?” I pointed at myself instinctively after being abruptly thrown into the conversation.

“That’s true, Hikki watches people rea—“

Ebina-san jumped to her feet and interrupted Yuigahama. “See! It’s like an eye conversation unique to homos! It’s all about the Haya-Hachi!”

“There’s no such thing, nope,” I said.

What in the world is an eye conversation unique to homos? Is that some kind of Newtype disposition? Damn woman! Stop trying to be a rotten girl!

“Spare me from jokes like that,” I said.

“A-Ahaha…”

“Haa…”

Yuigahama made a strained smile while Yukinoshita let out a brief sigh, pressing against her temple as if restraining a headache.

Ebina-san let out the usual rotten “gufufu” laughter with a frightening voice, but she then suddenly pushed up the frame of her glasses with her finger. I couldn’t tell where her gaze was directed towards due to the glare in the lenses of her glasses.

“…Well, I wouldn’t call it a complete joke though.” Ebina-san added with a small voice. If anything, it was so minute that I thought I’d miss it entirely. Before I could question the intent behind her words, Ebina-san moved her chair and leaned forward. “Oh, but we can always talk our brains out about the possibilities of Haya-Hachi!”

“No way, definitely…”

“Now that’s a shame,” said Ebina-san. “Anyway, I’ll be on my way now. See you again, Yui, Yukinoshita-san.”

She stood up and headed towards the door of the club room.

“Ah, okay. Thanks!”

“If you come across anything, we’ll be happy if you could let us know again.”

“Sure thing. See you later.” Ebina-san answered Yuigahama and Yukinoshita with the wave of her hand and left the room.

Watching the door for a moment, I let out a short sigh. “Looks like it’ll take a bit more time until we come across something.”

“I suppose so.” Yukinoshita nodded and reached out to her tea that turned cold.

Yuigahama had her mug in one hand as well while fiddling with her cellphone in the other.

“…Restroom break real quick.” I informed them briefly and left the clubroom.

Not much time had passed since Ebina-san’s departure from the Service Club. She shouldn’t have gone that far. I wanted to go into a little more detail, no, I wanted to ask her what she really meant by those words.

And on top of that, I felt that she still had some things she wanted to talk about because I was the only one she didn’t say goodbye to. Either that, she might’ve just had forgotten me. In that case, that’s more like bullying, right? If the invisible presence was Another3, then someone probably died.

With those thoughts in mind, I turned the corner and sure enough, Ebina-san was walking ahead.

The sounds of my footsteps echoed in the hallway and Ebina-san turned around.

“You know, I think it’s kind of pointless.” She started off. Her tone was as though she had anticipated I was going to chase after her.

“What is?”

“The way you’re digging around like this. Hayato-kun isn’t someone who’ll expose his weaknesses so easily.”

She halted to a stop with the gaze beyond the lenses fixated on me. The coldness of her stare showed a distinct contrast with the expression she maintained every day. Or possibly, this rigidness could’ve been a part of her real nature. It was something I had sensed in the incident during the field trip.

I lightly shrugged my shoulders and looked away from her eyes. “…I figured. But after talking big to Miura, I have to get this done.”

“Uh huh…”

Thereon, our words disappeared.

In this hallway, the only ones present were Ebina-san and me. When we both went quiet, a silence filled the air with only the audible sounds of the wind tapping against the windows.

Feeling awkward from standing still in the silence, I scratched my head and what I wanted to ask Ebina-san came to mind. I coughed once and opened my mouth.

“I actually wanted to ask you, is your side fine with this?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, regardless of how things go, I can’t imagine you guys acting the same way as you alwa—“

“That won’t happen.” Ebina-san cut me short and promptly answered. “Hayato-kun will definitely find a way to avoid the issue and I think Yumiko will understand that. I don’t think the class change will actually cause everything to break down.”

Her statement was ambiguous, but her voice had a quality akin to conviction.

“I see. You trust them quite a bit, don’t you?”

“That’s not really it… I just think Hayato-kun’s going to choose the method where no one is hurt. Rather than trust, it’s more like a selfish wish of mine.” Ebina-san smiled, sticking out her tongue.

Perhaps, if I was like I was before, I’m sure I wouldn’t have felt an ink of suspicion in Ebina-san’s words. I think I would’ve arbitrarily decided in some respects that Hayama Hayato to be just that kind of person.

But now, it’s different. Her words may not be clear, or something tangible, but even so, lodged deep within them was a murky sensation of discomfort.

That’s why it made me want to ask.

“Hey, why do you think that?”

“…Answering everyone’s expectations is Hayato-kun, after all.” Ebina-san removed her gaze from me and smiled again. Not a tinge of charm was in that smile, only the slight upward curve of her lips; a cold expression.

Having been witness to that so nearby, I couldn’t think of any words to reply with. In that small born silence, Ebina-san hopped a step back from me and shortly raised her hand. “Okay, I’ll be going home now.”

“Ah, yeah…” I said, managing to answer. I watched Ebina-san’s back as she left.

As of now, I had yet to arrive at something reminiscent of an answer.

But something felt strangely out of place. As I contemplated over the source of it, I headed back to the clubroom.

Abruptly, I looked up at the sky from the window of the hallway. Up where I looked was an indistinct, dim winter sky, tinged with scarlet and indigo.

In due time, the sky would eventually blacken.

Thoughtlessly, naturally, and betraying no one's expectations.

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After Ebina-san's coming and going to our club, we didn't see any more visitors. Once it was time for us to wrap up our activities, I set out for home.

I announced my return at the entrance with "I'm back", but I wasn't met with a response. My two corporate slaves of parents weren't likely to be home given the time and Komachi was either at cram school or in her room.

I ascended the steps, entered the pitch black living room and flipped on the lights.*Flippity-flip.*

The light filled the room.

Afterwards, a human figure appeared in the living room that I thought should've been empty.

"Whoa! Freaky…"

Taking a closer look, Komachi was resting her cheeks in her hand absentmindedly at the table.

Having heard my pathetic voice, she turned towards me in realization and grinned. "…Ah, onii-chan. Welcome back."

"Y-Yeah, I'm back…"

I threw my coat and bag onto the sofa and switched on the heater. Apparently, Komachi had been in that daze for a while now. The living room was completely chilly.

"What's wrong, Komachi?" I sat on the couch and asked.

Komachi showed an embarrassed grin and fell forward onto the table.

"N-No more. I just can't anymore…" Komachi sobbed as she spoke and then began holding her head. "Uuuu… When I fail this exam, it'll definitely be the start of the downward spiral of my life… And then the neighbors will laugh at us, 'Did you hear about the two shut-in kids at the Hikigaya household? They're two peas in a pod, fufufu'… I'm sure I won't be able to lead a proper life!"

"Uh, I'm not a shut-in though…"

Not lending an ear at all to my retort, Komachi rustled her hair and collapsed forward on the table again.

Oh boy, here she goes again… It's the same trap she fell into earlier during the end of the year.

Well, there were things like marriage blues or maternity blues, also, there's Tail Blue[4], too. In Komachi's case, it'd be something like exam blues. Others included the Sentai force guys like Exam Points Red or Corporate Slave Black. What an unpleasant Sentai force, yep.

Anyway, I had a general idea of how to handle Komachi.

“How about taking a break? Like, think about something fun,” I said in accordance to my onii-chan manual, but I saw no response from Komachi. *Usually, she’d bite on to it instantly…*

I rested against the sofa finding it strange and turned towards Komachi. She was slumping over the table and was slightly pouting. Her fist atop the table was lightly grasped.

“…There’s no way I’ll have fun.”

Unlike earlier, the humorous tone from her voice was gone. Her sulking brought back memories of when she was a little kid.

“Did something happen?”

“Nothing.”

Komachi’s answering voice was blunt. However, contrary to being so brief, it sounded like she wanted to say more.

I sat there quietly, waiting for her to continue. Nearly a whole minute had passed. In the living room, the discernible sounds were just the ticking second hand of the clock on the wall and the rush of cars driving past from outside.

Eventually, Komachi let out a resigned sigh.

“…It’s just, you know? When I take a break, or right before I sleep, or when I eat, I start wondering if I did that or if I finished this,” said Komachi, talking gradually. She didn’t look my way, fixated only on her lightly gripped fist. “Like, what am I going to do if I didn’t make it… or like, what if I failed, what am I going to do? Stuff like that.”

She crushed her fist harder. To unravel that, I spoke to her as slowly as possible. “You don’t need to worry about that. After all, you did pass the exams for the private school.”

“It’s not like I want to go there.”

Komachi turned her face away from me. By doing that, I couldn’t get a read on her expression. Then, I could hear a disjointed voice.

“It’d be dumb to pay for a school that I don’t want to go to… I’ll feel bad for dad, too.”

Both of our parents worked, so we had some flexibility. Honestly, I think we had enough saved to cover tuition for a private school. But money probably wasn’t the issue Komachi wanted to talk about.

But she feels bad for dad, huh? Typically, she’d just omit him, but times like these were when she’d bring him up.

Of course, it’s not like Komachi truly hated pops.

But backed into the corner by exams, her normally hidden nature was coming apart at the seams.

“Plus, I really don’t want to hear that I failed…”

Her voice was shaking.

Komachi was a bright and capable little sister, always with a smile on her face. She handled our house and of course, she even looked out for her older brother. There’s no doubt she kept this energetic behavior at school as well.

But during the winter break, it’s certain that she was trying to take some distance from her friends. Present there was the friction and pressure of human relationships that I couldn’t fathom.

The more energetic you are, the more apparent it is when your radiance is gone. Private schools had already announced the results of the exams and it should’ve been a topic going around the classes between classmates. The thorns of offhand remarks that were normally trivial would eventually turn into pointed spears at the heart.

That’s why people wanted to take some distance from people and from reality.

When Komachi finished her fragmented words, in their place, I could hear a sigh as if she was sobbing.

I got up from the sofa and sat at the seat across Komachi.

“Well, yes, high school exams are certainly important. If you pass this one, there’s definitely going to be a considerable gap between you and your middle school friends and it’ll be hard to face them.”

“Uh huh…” Komachi responded with a voice that didn’t seem to understand all that well.

It’s possible that this was reiterated at school, cram school, or even by our parents. But I continued regardless.

“But universities exams are much more important and job hunting is probably much, much more important. And while you’re doing all that, your friends will decrease and most of all, if you get through them, it’ll become a complete disaster.”

“Y-Yeah…”

Her voice was mixed with confusion to which I answered with all my confidence, “But it’ll be fine.”

Komachi lifted her head. Her eyes were slightly wet, her expression somewhat surprised. When she made a face like that, memories of when she was younger surfaced and I slipped out a smile.

“Instead, you can put it like this: As long everything checks out at the end, you’re good. Same goes with baseball playoffs. Attending an amazing high school or college is similar to receiving an advantage for taking first place in a regular season. The advantages will be in your favor, but it won’t decide everything.”

Once, there was a team who had seized ahold the title of number one in Japan by climbing up through a series of short battles in the brief post-season from rank three in the regular season. No one knew what happened. When you're losing, subbing in a pinch-hitter could lead to an upset like an infield hit to the slow grounder. Life and baseball were dramas without a script.

I thought I was passionately telling a story, but Komachi didn't seem too interested in the talk about baseball as if she had zoned out halfway through and only her face was directed towards me without answering.

Mmm, according to my onii-chan radar, this isn't what Komachi wanted to hear.

I scratched my head, clueless of what else to say, and decided to just say whatever came to mind.

"Well, you know… If it comes down to it, if it's just you, I'll do something about it."

"Onii-chan…"

"Supporting two people isn't all that much different from one person. I'll beg our parents for you."

"You're supposed to say you're going to work there…" Komachi wiped her eyes as she spoke and smiled.

"That's a last resort for me… And this may be odd coming from me, but your onii-chan is pretty darn amazing. I can succeed with most things… That's why, just relax." I stretched my hand out and lightly patted Komachi's head, then rustled her hair.

"Hey, onii-chan. When I watch you…" said Komachi, cutting her words short. She rested her hand against mine and looked at me with eyes that were still slightly moist. She then let out an exhausted sigh. "I start to think that getting so worried is really dumb…" She brushed off my hand.

"…Good for you."

This darn little sister... This is what I get for being nice to her... Then again, that makes her cute too, okay? Mmm, but the cuteness onii-chan was expecting was just a little different...

"Argh, okay, enough of this. Back to studying."

Komachi stood up from her chair, returning to her usual self and headed out towards the living room. When she held the knob of the door, she stopped abruptly.

"Thanks." She muttered, quickly went out the living room, and shut the door.

Past the door was just the sound of climbing footsteps that sounded much busier than normal.

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The following day after school, Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and I arrived at front of the conference room.

We were here to assist the student council as requested by Hiratsuka-sensei yesterday, that is, to prepare for the academic and career center. Although I stated that I would've been fine alone, the two arrived at the conclusion that they had nothing else to do and the situation ended with "Let's get this finished quickly with the three of us!"

The last time I was here at the conference room was during the Cultural Festival; well, during the preparations for the Sports Festival.

I placed my hand on the door and the conference room was already unlocked. It's likely that Isshiki and the other student council members were already here. I knocked on the door and I could hear a slow-witted voice, "Cooome in." I opened the door and Isshiki at the window side turned around.

"Ah, senpai!"

As if to say, "So sloooow" Isshiki trotted over and tried to grab my sleeve. But as soon as she noticed the two behind me, she slowly bowed.

"Oh, thank you two as well for coming."

"Yahallo, Iroha-chan!"

"What should we do?"

Yuigahama cheerfully answered to her bow and Yukinoshita looked inside the conference room.

Similarly, I shifted my eyes inside and the room was currently in its default setup. A long, narrow square was formed by and seats were systematically lined around it.

"Since we're prepping for the academic and career center, we have to reorganize the room. Also, the student council has to be around and act as appropriate support or something."

"Huh, sounds like that'll take a while," I said.

Isshiki dropped her shoulders. "Yes, that's right. And this is supposed to be student council related work, too… It's seriously nothing but grunt work here…" said Isshiki.

"Well, that's just what the student council is…"

"I didn't hear a single thing about this… Gosh, if it wasn't for a certain somebody telling me to become the student council president…"

Flick flick flick. Isshiki intentionally sent me glances.

"So annoying… But for how much you're grumbling, it looks like you're actually working."

"…W-Well, it *is* work, after all," said Isshiki, twisting her body uncomfortably and looked away from me. She then coughed once and she shook the stack of papers in her hand. "A-Anyway! Please move the chairs and tables. Then create six special booths with the partitions. Senpai and vice-president, please handle the heavy lifting."

Aye, aye! I nodded, making a side peace sign ☆ internally, and Isshiki returned one as well. She then looked at Yukinoshita and Yuigahama.

"As for the girls, please handle the chairs. There should be one seat on the tutor side and two on the student side. If you finish, please prepare tea for the tutor's use."

Isshiki handed out instructions as she looked at the printout. Surprisingly, she had become very efficient and was now quite the expert. The secretary girl in braids nodded in response to the instructions.

On the other hand, an individual was tilting her head. Of course, it was Yuigahama.

"Chuuter…? A mouse?"

"It's not a pet's name, you know…"

We're not talking about Nyanta, Hamtaro, Ebizou, or Kikuzou here. Wondering how I should explain it to her, Yukinoshita assertively took a step forward.

"Tutors are people who give advice and assist with education guidance. In this case, they'll be people who are doing the counseling."

"That's right. Along with the teachers, we're also having alumni and third years who received recommendations attending," said Isshiki.

"Alumni…" Yukinoshita frowned.

*What a coincidence. Right now, I probably imagined the exact same thing as she did.*It was an unpleasant premonition I often had.

"Okay. I need to go call the tutors, so vice president, please handle the rest." Isshiki stated and left the conference room.

The rest of us proceeded with the preparations according to the instructions of the vice president.

As I carried in the partitions with the vice president, he looked apologetic and spoke up.

"Sorry about this, you really helped us out. We wanted help just for setting up the room."

"Ahh, it's fine with me. Having things to do beforehand is a lot better."

During the Christmas event, we had gone through hell because we had nothing set in stone. Compared to then, I think the situation had turned considerably better

whether it came to Isshiki's motivation, the student council's awkwardness, or the relationship of between Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and me.

The trigger could've been anything and if we could carry heavy things together like this little by little, then we should be able to change our way of being.

We moved the tables, lined the partitions, and the only remaining work was what the girls had to do. Since we worked so efficiently, we were left with plenty of spare time before the scheduled start of the center.

There, I spotted a figure restlessly examining the interior of the conference room at the door, coming here earlier than the others. The familiar ponytail that went back and forth at the door shook.

Her name was, I think, Honda, no, Suzuki… or maybe Yamaha? Weren't these just motorcycle stuff? I mean, her delinquent appearance already gave off that impression. Motorcycle, motorcycle… Motorcycle, Kawasaki, motorcycle? Yeah, it's probably Kawasaki.

Since Kawasaki was worried about whether it was okay for her to enter, I decided to call out to her.

"Hey, it's going to take a bit longer."

"…'kay."

Kawasaki froze when I spoke to her. Her response was rather short, blunt even. *She always reacts like this, doesn't she…?*

But having her stand around and wait pointlessly made me feel apologetic since she came all the way here. Until the room was finished setting up, I decided to pass the time with her.

"Then again, you're actually here for the academic and career center, huh?"

"F-For the most part…"

Kawasaki's attitude seemed agitated somehow when she answered. She certainly did feel more like a regular girl whenever she reacted like this. Though there's a frightening air to her, her earnestly coming to a center like this made her appear like a good child. That part of her made uncle see her in a very favorable light, yep.

This is a good opportunity. I'll try asking Kawasaki what her career path is, though I'm not sure if it'll be of any use.

"Oh yeah, what are you doing for your career path?"

"Huh? Me? I'm… thinking of going to a public school for the liberal arts… or something."

"Specific and vague at the same time, huh…" I said.

She started off certain about the schools she was interested in, but she ended on an ambiguous note.

Kawasaki then glared at me with half-closed eyes. “Got a problem?”

“Not at all. Not at all, okay?”

I ended up responding politely. Now, couldn’t she do something about that hostility of hers…? Of course I had no problems with it. I’d totally wish she’d stop with that real monk[5]aura of hers. She could probably shoot out some Raging Fists, too…

“But if you already picked out a place, did you really need to come?”

“…I wasn’t sure about my grades, so I just thought I’d come and ask about them

While her words were straightforward, a lack of confidence could be detected in them. It looks like she was determined to enter a public school.

Yeah, that’s right. She had siblings, didn’t she? Every family had their own respective circumstances.

Any household, no matter whose it was, had circumstances. That should apply to Hayama and Yukinoshita all the same. In Kawasaki’s case, she had a lot of siblings. She gave the future some thought and decided to go with a public institution. She had a younger sister at a nursery school, too. So there wasn’t any harm in attending a public school. *What a nice onee-chan, really. Worlds apart from a certain onee-sama out there…*

“Speaking of which, is your little sister doing okay? Uhh, Mii-chan?”

“Huh? Who the heck is that?” Kawasaki sent me an intense glare.

O-Oh c’mon, I just got her name wrong… This darn siscon… Anyway, what’s her name again…? Haa-chan? No, that’d be me, I think. Hachiman turns into Haa-chan. Okay, how about Kaa-chan… well, that’s for maman.

I reasoned through several thoughts and when I arrived at a name that sounded familiar, I clapped my hands.

“Oh, it’s Saa-chan.”

In that instant, silence settled in. Then, Kawasaki snapped to her senses and retreated one step backwards. With a completely red face, she violently spat out, “Huuh!? Who are you calling Saa-chan—You have no right to say that.”

“Oh yeaaah. Saki, huh?”

So that’s why she turned into Saa-chan, makes sense. However, Kawasaki didn’t seem at all too pleased and took another step backwards.

“H-Huuh!?”

Stop with the annoying “hah, hah!?” Are you T-san[6] born at a temple or something? In Kawasaki’s case, it’d be K-san? Ah, right, it’s Kei-chan.

“Kei-chan, right? Kei-chan. I just remembered,” I said.

Kawasaki sharply glared at me. “Next time you forget, I’ll pound you.”

“R-Right…”

I can’t say it… I can’t say that I forgot her little sister’s name and that Kawasomething-san’s name was fuzzy to me, too… But talking about her little sister apparently caused her to soften and she began speaking with a gentle tone, completely different from earlier.

“Next time, um, if you see her again… can you play with Kei-cha—Keika, again?”

“Mm, yeah. Well, I don’t imagine ever seeing her again, but if I do, sure.”

“Okay…”

After nodding to her reserved reply, the door of the conference room slid open and Yuigahama’s face popped out.

“Hikki, we’re done preparing.”

And then Yuigahama noticed Kawasaki, going “Ohh” and waved her hand. Kawasaki nodded back and bowed her head.

“Are you here for the center? Come in, come in!” said Yuigahama, and beckoned Kawasaki in.

As I watched her leave, I opened the door to the conference room entirely. Doing this made it easier for other students to enter.

When I was about to place the door stopper at the bottom, a voice spoke to me from above.

“Hey, I didn’t get to ask you… your career path.”

I turned around and only Kawasaki’s head was facing me.

“I’m going for a private school in the liberal arts.”

“Uh huh… So, the liberal arts.” Kawasaki stated in disinterest and walked towards Yuigahama’s motioning.

…Well, it’s the same liberal arts. In the off chance that we end up in the same classes next year, then I might meet her little sister again. So I’ll play with her when that happens.

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After Kawasaki showed up, other students intermittently started to come by. I glanced at the clock and the scheduled start of the center was just a little longer.

Beyond the door, a noisy, speaking voice could be heard from the hallway. Yukinoshita who was standing next to me strained her ear in its direction. Yuigahama walked to us and sent a curious gaze towards the hallway side.

It was a familiar voice to me as well. Sure enough, the owner of the voice had accompanied Isshiki Iroha into the conference room. And expectations met, it was Yukinoshita Haruno. Following behind her was Meguri-senpai.

When Haruno-san spotted me, she amiably waved her hand. “Oh, it’s Hikigaya-kun. Hyahallo!”

“Hello.” I bowed my head slightly.

Haruno-san made a content smile and then shifted her gaze to Yukinoshita. Yukinoshita boldly took on that gaze and both of their gazes flew back and forth.

“…Nee-san.”

“So Yukino-chan was here, too. Mmkay, onee-chan will hear you out on lots of things today,” said Haruno-san, poking fun at her.

Yukinoshita squinted with a grimace. *Situation going critical… Really, you two, please do stuff like that at home…*

Promptly assessing the dangerous mood, Yuigahama stood next to Yukinoshita and started a conversation with Haruno-san.

“Ah, so it was Haruno-san when they said alumni, huh?”

“Yep, yep. I heard something about getting a reward…” Haruno-san smiled with incredible glee. “So here I am♪!”

This person sure has a lot of free time or maybe she doesn’t have any friends…? I had my suspicions of her, but Haruno-san was the type of person to be liked by others. She seemed to have earned another follower today as well. Isshiki came immediately next to Haruno-san and started a conversation with sparkling eyes.

“I’m soooo glad an amazing senpai like you came today, you really helped us out!”

“Really? It’s not *that* big of a deal, you know?”

Although she was acting unassuming, Haruno-san’s composed smile was brimming with confidence, somehow even frighteningly captivating.

“Not at all, Haru-san-senpai, you’re just, like, so cool! I really admire you! I want to be just like Haru-san-senpai, too… or something.”

“Thanks you!”

Haruno-san embraced Isshiki and coddled her. In her arms, Isshiki was making a sheepish smile. *Ahh, this girl was trying to get in the good graces of an influential person and if things went well, she’d try to get some know-how knowledge…*

But Haruno-san, a formidable enemy, chuckled with a fascinated smile as she rubbed Isshiki’s hair, as if she had seen through that level of calculation completely.

I witnessed something unpleasant… If possible, I didn't want Isshiki turning out like Haruno-san. But Meguri-senpai had a delighted smile as she watched them, that unnatural scene possibly being interpreted differently by those who looked.

In accordance to the Solace no Hado[7], the comfy Megu Megu Megu☆rin Megurin Power, I could feel my heart becoming nearly Meguri'd.

When she noticed me, she greeted me with the wave of her hand and walked up to me. "Hikigaya-kun, it sure feels like a long time!"

"Ah, right… Senpai, you were called, too?"

"Yep, I received a designated school recommendation, after all."

When we started that discussion, Yuigahama came over and joined in. "Wh-What's a designated school recommendation?"

"A designated school recommendation is the system where a university imposes a quota of student recommendations on a high school. Students who satisfy the selection requirements are nominated and recommended by the high school. The relatively high success rate compared to direct applications is one characteristic of the system."

For some reason, Yukinoshita had answered Yuigahama's question. Meguri-senpai was listening and nodded her head.

"That's Yukinoshita-san for you. You're so knowledgeable! For our school, there are considerably prominent universities you can be recommended for. So if you can maintain excellent grades in school, you'll be able to get one."

"Fufun", Meguri-senpai's small boastful puff of her chest was adorable. *Gahh, I'm getting Meguriiii'd…*

However, this former student council president wasn't just a comfy person. When work needed to be done, she made sure it happened. Otherwise, she wouldn't be able to get something like a recommendation. The level-headed Meguri-senpai looked at the clock. It was just about a few more minutes until the scheduled start time.

She walked towards Isshiki who was still frolicking with Haruno-san and asked, "President, what should we do?"

"Ah. Then, Shiromeguri-senpai, can you take the corner booth while Haru-san-senpai takes the one next to it…"

After Isshiki was pulled back into reality, she began making assignments. As she was doing that, Yukinoshita glanced at the clock again. She then called out to Haruno-san.

"Nee-san, do you have a moment?"

"Hmmm?"

“I want to ask you something. Hikigaya-kun, Yuigahama-san, can I have some of your time as well?” said Yukinoshita, and she motioned us towards the corner of the conference room.

Since she said she wanted to ask something and also called us together, I had a general idea of what she was going to do. She was probably thinking of asking Haruno-san about Hayama’s career path. When that came to mind, the one with the longest association with Hayama, both inside and outside of school, was certainly Haruno-san. Yukinoshita’s thinking was on the right track.

We covertly gathered at the corner of the conference room and Yukinoshita frankly asked, “Do you have any idea what Hayama’s career path may be?”

As if Haruno-san had not expected a question like that, she repeatedly blinked her eyes. But she promptly let out a short, derisive laugh. “Hayato’s career path? Oh, is that it?”

Her apathetic tone gave off the impression as if she was aware of something.

Not overlooking that, Yukinoshita inquired, “Do you know something?”

“Who knows? I’m not really interested, so I haven’t asked. I bet he’s already chosen something anyway.” Haruno-san answered back curtly and let out a long sigh of amazement. She then directed a mean-spirited smile towards Yukinoshita. Her eyes brimmed with a sadistic, dark glitter. “…Besides, Yukino-chan, you should have an idea of what it is without having to ask me.”

“I wouldn’t be asking you if I did, nee-san,” said Yukinoshita, replying with a similarly sharp and cold gaze.

That provocative tone caused Haruno-san to show a slight grimace for just an instant.

But she immediately retracted it and with a voice not severe in tone, but composed, bluntly stated, “Think very hard about it on your own.”

“……”

The way she spoke as if in rebuke caused Yukinoshita to lose her words. Yuigahama, as well, widened her eyes and looked at Haruno-san. Even I was slightly caught off guard. It was a tone that didn’t feel hostile or malicious, yet by no means could it be described as virtuous or affectionate.

Haruno-san promptly stuck out her tongue and showed another teasing, unpleasant smile.

“Here I was thinking you could finally do things by yourself, yet you’re relying on people again like back then. I mean, that’s what made you sooo adorable when you were younger. Oh, I know,” said Haruno-san. “More importantly, Yukino-chan, what’s your career path?”

When she asked Yukinoshita, she came back to her senses. She flicked aside the hair at her shoulders and looked at her haughtily. “I don’t believe it’s necessary to tell you, nee-san.”

“Mom’s also the one who asked me to. Unless an opportunity like this comes around, it’s kind of hard to ask. Yukino-chan never, ever mentions the important things, after all. Onee-chan doesn’t know what to do here.” Haruno-san placed her hand on her cheeks with a wry smile. She sounded like she was joking, but that tenderness instantly vanished and she made a glance at me. “…Right, Hikigaya-kun?”

“Ah, no…” I stuttered with my answer due to being abruptly brought up.

Haruno-san’s eyes that looked as if she had seen through everything grabbed ahold of me and wouldn’t let me go. In that instant, at the corner of my vision, I could see Yukinoshita biting her lips with a downcast look.

“…It has nothing to do with you, nee-san.”

“So coooold. Ah, I know. Hikigaya-kun, why don’t you talk to onee-chan about some things?” said Haruno-san. “…I can tell you anything, you know?”

She poked my cheeks and peered into my face. Because we were inside, her bosom, likely covered outside by her cut and sewn muffler scarf, peeked out and a sweet smell of perfume was—close, close, close!

“No, well, I’ve already decided…”

I made some distance equivalent to the amount she approached me with and strongly bent my body backwards. Haruno-san’s cheeks swelled in dissatisfaction. She then let out a bored sigh and turned to Yuigahama this time.

“Aww. Okay, I guess I’ll settle for Gahama-chan then.”

“I’m just an addition!?”

Yuigahama shrieked in agony from the excessive crude treatment and Haruno-san giggled.

After that, Isshiki and Meguri-senpai came over. They probably came to call Haruno-san. The start of the center was approaching as well.

Naturally, there were students who arrived at the last minute and the conference room erupted with activity.

In that crowd, I spotted Hayama and the others. It’s likely he was acting as a chaperon for Tobe or even Miura.

Of course, he noticed us as well. Although we were at the corner of the room, Haruno-san, an outsider, attracted attention easily.

Near the entrance of the room, somewhat further away from us, Hayama called out to her.

“Haruno-san…”

“Ah, it’s Hayato.” Haruno-san greeted with the lifting of her hand.

Then, it sounded as if the commotion in the conference room had slightly ballooned. Haruno-san tilted her head to that reaction.

“Is it just me or do the stares feel kind of strange?”

“Well, yes, you do stand out.”

I didn’t need to say it, but from the perspective of an onlooker, Haruno-san was a beauty that just walking in a city would cause people to glance at her. In a school environment, she stood out like a sore thumb.

But Haruno-san made a face that didn’t buy into my words.

“It feels a little different from that though…” said Haruno-san.

“Ahh, it’s gotta be because of that rumor.” Isshiki slipped out her remark in recollection.

Meguri-senpai latched onto that. “Oh, that rumor! It’s kind of wonderful, don’t you think? I really like those kinds of rumors, too.”

“Rumor? Huh, what’s that about, Iroha-chan?”

Haruno-san didn’t let that word slide by and she directed a gaze to Isshiki.

“Ah, ummm…” Isshiki contemplated whether it was okay to tell her, making alternating glances between the discouraged Yukinoshita and Hayama who was chatting further away, and was at a loss for words.

But Haruno-san placed her hands lightly on Isshiki’s shoulders as if pressing her for an answer. “Tell me please?”

At that point, she couldn’t refuse. Those words were just as heavy. Haruno-san wore her usual smile while quietly waiting for Isshiki to act. After a few seconds of that, as if giving in, Isshiki whispered into Haruno-san’s ears while being mindful of the reactions around her.

Haruno-san leaned her ear to one side as she nodded with an amused expression.*Ahh, if this person gets wind of the rumor, there’s no telling what’ll happen…*

But Haruno-san’s attitude wasn’t as I imagined it to be.

“Oh, so that’s what it is… That’s something they’ve been through since a long time ago,” said Haruno-san, coldly.

After thanking Isshiki, she turned around as if dropping all of her interest.

“Meguri, let’s get going.”

“Okaaay.”

Haruno-san accompanied Meguri-senpai to their assigned booths. When she parted from us, she turned her head and waved her hand at us.

“Okay, see you around!”

Both her expression and gestures were cheerful, but next to me, Isshiki had a stiff smile in contrast. She then rotated her head towards me as if making mechanical sounds and let out a relieved sigh.

“Th-That was sooo scary… That’s definitely Yukinoshita-senpai’s onee-san, there’s no doubt about it!”

“No one doubts that.”

“That’s an unpleasant way to lump us together.” Yukinoshita sighed, pressing against her temple as if holding back a headache.

Yuigahama then lightly patted her shoulders. “It’s okay! Yukinon isn’t scary at all!”

“That’s fine, but I somehow get the impression you’re making a fool out of me…”

“Eh? Th-That’s not true! Yukinon, you’re like, how should I say it… really cute!” Yuigahama clenched her fists and emphasized.

Yukinoshita made a flabbergasted look and averted her face. *But even so, you two are as friendly as ever…*

In any case, the academic and career center was going to begin. Fortunately, we were only ordered to set up the room. The rest could be left up to the student council.

“Alright, Isshiki, we’re going back.”

“Yes, thank you very much!” Isshiki politely bowed.

I nodded back and then called out to Yukinoshita and Yuigahama.

“Alright, let’s head back to the club.”

“I suppose so.”

“Uh huh, got it.”

I accompanied the two on our way out of the conference room and we passed by Hayama and the others who were stopped at the entrance. I made a glance at Hayama and he was engaged in a conversation with the others.

“Beeh, who the heck should I talk to?”

“There’s still time until it’s your turn, so just think it over.”

Hayama had a bitter smile to Tobe’s words and he quietly looked to the front. Ahead was Haruno-san.

“Hey, Hayato… Are you close with that person?” Miura stated with a quiet voice as she looked at Haruno-san without turning to Hayama.

Hayama looked at her, to some extent with surprise, but quickly made a broad smile. "…She's just a childhood friend."

With that conversation behind me, we went back to the clubroom.

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A desktop calendar was set on top of the table in the clubroom. Well, it wasn't so much of a calendar, but more of a desktop cat album, what with cat images placed in all the spaces of the page. I stared at the calendar while groaning.

"…I poured your tea."

"Hm? Ahh, thanks." I sipped from my teacup as I glared at the calendar.

Yuigahama gawked at the calendar. "There isn't too much time left until the turn-in date, huh?"

"Yeah. But I'm totally clueless here…"

So far, I had asked several people indirectly, but not a single answer relating to Hayama's career path came up. It might've been because I was so poor at asking people, but if I went out and checked with people upfront, there'd be problems if he got wind of it. I was already refused by him in person when I asked him directly, after all. It'd be inconvenient if it got out that I was digging around for the reason why he didn't want to tell anyone about his career path. I didn't care what he thought of me, but I wanted to avoid putting Miura in an uncomfortable position.

As I thought about various things while counting down the few remaining days, there was the sound of a teacup being placed on a saucer.

I turned my head and Yukinoshita was making an unusually earnest expression.

"Hikigaya-kun… I spoke to you about Hayama's parents before, correct?"

"Yeah. Something about them being lawyers and doctors."

"…Huh!? Really!?" Yuigahama made a look of surprise, seemingly hearing this for the first time.

"You never asked?" I said.

Yuigahama inflated her cheeks as if slightly sulking. "You normally don't talk about stuff like that… I mean, it's not like I know what your parents do, Hikki."

"Both of them are just your typical corporate slaves."

"Ah, same here. My mom's a normal housewife though…"

Oh yeah, I totally get that vibe… Considering her inability to cook and her housewife aura in the strangest things, it was oddly plausible.

Your personality was greatly shaped by the environment in which you were raised. In the same way, I didn't want to be a corporate slave, owing it to my parents who I observed as I grew up. But hey, our household finances weren't in

dire straits since we had double the income, so I was quite grateful. You could even say the reason I was supportive of women independence was because of my working parents. And in the future, once Komachi started working, our double income would become triple income and our household would be secure.

As I dreamed about my wonderful family plan, Yuigahama continued the conversation.

"S-So is Hayato-kun going to follow his family?" asked Yuigahama.

Yukinoshita placed her hand to her chin and tilted her head.

"I wonder… Hayama-kun's father himself handles the law firm while his maternal grandfather is a family doctor, so both are certainly a possibility…"

"So we can't really narrow it down between the liberal arts or sciences then."

Be it lawyers or doctors, both occupations required credentials. If his only choice was just one or the other, then we could exclude one subject or the other, but with both options possible, ultimately, we were still clueless.

Yuigahama moaned as she listened. She then lifted her face. "But isn't it like super amazing if he went with either of them?"

"That's true. From a general perspective, I believe they're an affluent family." Yukinoshita nodded.

Certainly, if we're discussing lawyers and doctors, they had a strong profitable image. I was aware of some of the circumstances concerning Hayama's family, but it was outrageous having to hear it again. Why was a guy like that attending our school? He should've just gone to a better private school.

Well, I guess Yukinoshita's similar in that regard. I looked at Yukinoshita.

"Actually, can you really be saying that?"

"As far as cash is concerned, they're likely wealthier. I can't say for our total assets, however." Yukinoshita stated calmly and nonchalantly.

A girl of marriageable age should not be uttering words like cash and total assets. On the other hand, Yuigahama stared into space, twisting her head and mumbled something.

"Cash… card?"

Oh, so you know what a cash card is? Good on you, Yuigahama. I'll teach you what a debit card is next time.

Anyway, putting Yuigahama aside, let's think over Hayama's career path for now.

First without a doubt, the main premise was that he was planning to advance to university. Hayama was an honor student with excellent grades and placed second in our year on the proficiency exams. If he had no intention of continuing his

education, there'd be a huge ruckus amongst the teaching faculty, but according to Hiratsuka-sensei, that wasn't the case.

So far, so good.

But Hayama's career path wasn't what I wanted to know. At best, it was just which of the two subjects he was going to choose for his third year here.

"…I have no clue," I mumbled.

Similarly in contemplation, Yuigahama spoke up.

"Maybe it's the liberal arts? It seems like most people went with that, too."

"Yeah. Well, that's pretty easy to imagine."

In reality, everyone who pictured the human figure called Hayama Hayato generally thought that way. He was a person who didn't make things complicated, got along with everyone, and could even treat people like Zaimokuza and me at the bottom of the school caste kindly. The image of audacious frolicking and giggling wasn't inconsistent with the Hayama figure to this day.

But right now, a discrepancy was emerging. I had no clear idea how I was supposed to interpret that.

When I began thinking in silence again, Yukinoshita, similarly quiet, looked at me as if she wanted to say something. I responded with just my eyes and she started to speak in contemplation.

"I think… he'll choose the sciences…"

"Why's that?" Yuigahama asked.

Yukinoshita looked downwards anxiously. "I can't really say it's a grounded reason, but, um, it'll also be concerning me, so…"

"…You don't need to force yourself to say it if you don't want to."

Yukinoshita's voice was mixed with hesitation and anxiety that I instinctively interrupted her. However, after repeatedly opening and closing her mouth, she lifted her head as if making her resolve.

"Not at all, um… It's not like there'll be anything to lose if you knew, right?"

She sure is bad at wording things, not that I had the right to say that. Yuigahama and I adjusted our sitting and faced Yukinoshita. She then slowly began to speak.

"You're aware that Hayama-kun has a long association with my family, correct? When we were younger, the two of us and nee-san were often together. Since nee-san's that kind of person, we usually had to go along with whatever she did…" said Yukinoshita. "So to put it simply, I believe it's fine to assume that he grew up with nee-san as an influence."

After she finished, she let out a small sigh.

What she told me during the Christmas season didn't vary all that much from what she just said now. But now that I had witnessed the sight of the three of them together and heard their old stories in-person, I was struck with a definite feeling of reality.

The present Hayama Hayato. And the past Hayama Hayato spoken by various people. What I needed to think from this point on was the Hayama Hayato of the future. Other things, I could put to the side for now.

"Um, Haruno-san went with the sciences, right? So that means he might also choose the sciences. You do get influenced a lot when you're younger, too," said Yuigahama.

"Yes… But I can't say that for sure."

Yukinoshita's answer sounded vague. Yuigahama and I looked at Yukinoshita to continue and with a preface, "It might be a contradiction, but" she said, "If he plans to continue our family relations in the near future, then I believe it would be much more efficient if he succeeded the law firm."

"Wouldn't that mean he'll be going with the liberal arts, then?" I said.

Yukinoshita shook her head. "There are other ways to continue that relation, so…"

Well, yeah.

Not just lawyers, but other business conditions could be used to maintain a relationship. It didn't even need to be from a business standpoint either. For example, a marital relationship, though it felt completely out of touch with reality, was one possibility that could be considered.

As I thought it over, Yukinoshita added in supplement. "Of course, I don't know what Hayama's family thinks on the matter. I can't say for certain that isn't influencing Hayama's career path. I've never heard him going against his parents before."

"Ahh, right. Hayato-kun seems like he handles his family business quite a lot, huh?"

Yukinoshita nodded to Yuigahama's simple thought. After listening to this story, I had a general grasp of his family's situation. Even so, we still lacked a solution.

Before I noticed, I was scratching my head and let out a sigh.

"I doubt we can ask Hayama's parents. There's not much we can do if we're heading into family territory."

"I suppose so… " Yukinoshita's expression turned gloomy. "But at the very least, my mother wishes for a lasting relationship."

I reflexively averted my gaze.

“Got it. For now… I’ll think it over for a little bit,” I said, and stopped the conversation.

Truthfully, I really wanted time to organize my thoughts. At this point, our remaining option was to make conjectures from the scarce pieces we had. *Let’s just think about Hayama’s career path for now.*

After all.

If I didn’t do that, I had a feeling I was going to imagine something horribly nauseating.

I let out a big sigh and when the conversation was implied to be over, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama loosened their postures. Everyone reached out to their tea and a peaceful silence was born. The lukewarm tea that washed down my throat felt good.

The sound of a teacup being placed reverberated in the quiet room and Yukinoshita slowly opened her mouth.

“Um…”

“Hm?”

“I’m sorry for the other day when it seemed like my mother sent you away… I believe I could’ve have spoken up about it a little better.”

When she finished, she gazed at the surface of the tea in her cup and sucked in her lips. Yuigahama gently rubbed Yukinoshita’s shoulders.

“No worries at all. Besides, it’s not like we can just intrude on a family get-together. Right, Hikki?”

“Yeah. It’s not something you need to beat yourself over.”

“…Thank you.”

Yukinoshita expressed a gentle smile, faintly tinged with anxiety, and slightly bowed her head to Yuigahama and me.

Everything about her conduct was beautiful. Her elongated back, her hands gently joined together on her lap, her thin and supple fingertips, her long eyelashes that lined along her closed eyelids.

As I watched all of that in fixation, Yukinoshita lifted her face and our eyes met. We both frantically turned our faces away from each other.

“Sh-Shall we call it a day now? I’ll clean up the tea.”

As if finding it a little awkward, Yukinoshita stood up in a hurry and began cleaning. She placed the teapot and cups on a tray, likely planning to clean them outside.

“I-I’ll go clean them too!”

“That’s fine, so wait for a moment.”

Yukinoshita stopped Yuigahama just as she was about to stand up and hastily left the room. Yuigahama and I were left alone in the room and we exchanged looks. Yuigahama made a smile and giggled.

"Hey, Yukinon's starting to talk about herself a little more. Like you know how before she'd never talk about her family by herself?"

"That's… yeah, I guess so."

Perhaps, that might've been her way of getting closer to us. Though, she was incredibly awkward, abrupt, and slightly off-track. Even though she handled most things skillfully, there was a crude side to her, too.

No, I wasn't exactly in the position to be saying that about other people at all.

Someday, I'll properly ask. Right now, I really had no idea what things I was allowed to ask about, but even so, someday, I'll do it for sure.

× × ×

I parted from Yukinoshita and Yuigahama at the entrance of the school and headed towards the bicycle parking station.

The sun had mostly set and a chilly, wintry wind blew through the gaps of the school building. Other clubs had seemingly already concluded their activities, so the courtyard was very quiet.

As I walked in the courtyard, I could hear a calling voice going "Heeeey". I turned around, but no one was there.

"Up, look up!"

As I was told, I moved my eyes up. When I did, I was looking just near the student council room and at the open window was Yukinoshita Haruno waving.

"Hey, wait for me," she said, casually, and then disappeared.

"What the heck is she doing…?"

I thought, *Seriously, just how much free time does she have?* Then, someone else stood at the window. On closer inspection, it was Isshiki Iroha. She bowed her head, waved her hand as a goodbye with a smile, and promptly closed the curtains. *What's with her…?*

While looking up at the window of the student council room wondering what that was all about, before long was the sound of light footsteps. I turned in its direction and Haruno-san was running my way.

"Phew, I got totally absorbed in talking with Shizuka-chan and Iroha-chan that it got super late."

Seemingly having rushed over here, Haruno-san was somewhat short of breath. She then made glances around the area.

"Where's Yukino-chan? You're not together?"

"She has to catch the train."

"…What the heck. I totally waited for nothing then."

Ehh, weren't you totally absorbed in talking earlier? For this person to actually wait to ambush people is really scary… It's likely that after the academic and career center, Haruno-san warmed herself up in the heated student council room while keeping her eye on the courtyard. There's no doubt Isshiki was forced to kill time with her. *It's not even my fault, yet I was feeling apologetic all of a sudden now…*

As if she was pulling herself together, Haruno-san stood next to me and patted my shoulders. "Okay, Hikigaya-kun will do. Walk me to the station."

"Huh?"

Haruno-san didn't look satisfied with my response and placed her hand on her waist, looking sullen. "What's that? You're going to make a girl walk home this late? Escorting is a gentleman's role, you know!"

Well, generally speaking, you're the one at fault for staying out this late… It almost came out of my throat, but I swallowed it down. Or more correctly, I swallowed my breath.

Haruno-san held my arm and moved her mouth to my ears as if to have a secret talk and whispered, "You don't get very many chances to go home together with a beautiful onee-san like me, you know!"

Bzzt, a cold chill that wasn't from the winter weather ran up my spine. I took a step away from her in a panic and Haruno-san giggled in amusement… *She's seriously teasing me.* Unlike Isshiki and Komachi, her impish conduct was on the level of a great demon lord. And as you could see, you couldn't escape from the great demon lord.

I fanned my hot cheeks and pointed towards the bicycle parking station.

"Well, that's fine with me… May I go get my bike?"

"Okay, let's go together then." Haruno-san answered, stood next to me, and we began walking.

As the situation currently stood, it was already dark and on the way to the station, there was a park and obscure places like narrow alleys.

I also happened to be a man who lived in a Japanese society that respected seniority and placed women above men. As such, I was vulnerable to older women. I'll add that I was also weak to younger women, my little sister included. While I'm at it, I couldn't act strong in front of men as well, so I was essentially a weakling against all of mankind.

We left the bicycle parking station and exited the side gate. As I pushed my bike along, Haruno-san and I walked through the night city.

It wasn't all that far to the station. The private houses near the park were still illuminated, likely to have been decorated during Christmas, and the dark street was weakly lit up.

Although Haruno-san asked me to walk her, she was quiet along the way. Of course, I didn't say anything to her either and only the noises of cars driving past, voices leaking from the private homes, the blowing of the cold winter wind, and our footsteps could be heard.

Before long, we arrived at a small, bending lane and Haruno-san spoke up for the first time.

"Hikigaya-kun, what's your career path?"

"Well, the liberal arts."

"Oh okay. You're always reading books, after all. That's our Literature Boy."

"Ahh, no, that's… I guess."

It's true that I was reading a book when I met Haruno-san before in the city. But I was only reading it because it was really awkward… It was just my book barrier of certain death. Due to how lame that reason was, I naturally averted my eyes from Haruno-san.

But after Haruno-san took a half-step out in front, she leaned slightly forward and peered into my face.

"What kind of books do you read?"

"…Usually anything. I don't read foreign ones though."

"Mmhmm. Then, how about Akutagawa or Daizai?"

"For the most part, I've read them, but… I tend to read general literature more."

Quite frankly, I could enjoy things called literature if I decided to engross myself in it, but otherwise, the only worthless impressions coming out of me would be "Wow, that's high literature for you! It isn't famous for nothing! This is definitely an immortal work, so five stars!" On that point, entertaining works including light novels received plenty of flak, but they were still enjoyable even if the content wasn't appealing, so light novels were the best! What's with this terrible way of enjoying things…?

As I thought about those things, Haruno-san who was walking beside me nodded with agreeable responses. She then spoke up.

"Okay, so maybe the department of letters wouldn't fit you. I think you might find social studies or something along those lines more fun," said Haruno-san.

When she told me, my mouth was stuck open. At some point, she started counseling. I wasn't very satisfied since I wasn't really in the mood for it, but I should probably accept her good will with gratitude.

"…Thank you."

"You're welcome." Haruno-san smiled and then coughed. "So, did you hear anything from Yukino-chan about what department she's interested in or anything?"

Tch, so this was what she wanted to talk about! What a waste of my thanks…

"No, I didn't hear anything about her choosing one or the other."

"…Well, I guess she wouldn't tell you herself. Hikigaya-kun, make sure to ask her, okay?"

She slapped my back. *Um, even if you ask me to…* But I couldn't tell her to ask Yukinoshita herself. I doubt Yukinoshita would honestly answer her anyway, and I had yet to ask her myself. I couldn't tell someone to do something that I didn't do.

"Make sure to ask her the next time you meet her," said Haruno-san, formally. She then went "Ah" as if remembering something. "Speaking of which, did you ask Hayato directly?"

"Ahh. He told me some things, but he didn't tell me."

"Ohh. So Hayato didn't, huh…?"

Haruno-san removed her gaze from me and ahead towards the main street of the station that began to come into view. But it looked like she wasn't looking at the flow of people passing by. Her narrow, nicely shaped eyes were likely not looking at the present.

"I see. So Hayato's expecting something, too."

"Expecting what?"

Her sudden mutter didn't sound like it was directed to me, but I reflexively questioned it regardless. Eventually, Haruno-san looked my way and made an enchanting smile.

"Something that'll find him, I guess."

After stating only that, she slightly increased her pace and walked out in front of me. She flapped the hems of her red coat and did a turn.

"I'm fine up to here. We're almost at the station anyway. Thanks for walking me."

"Right, see you then…"

As I was about to lightly nod my head, Haruno-san stuck her index finger in front of my face and continued with a lively voice.

"Don't forget to ask Yukino-chan what her career path is. I'll be checking answers with you next time."

"Can you really call that checking answers…?" I said.

Haruno-san poked my cheek and smiled. “Don’t sweat the small details. See you!”

She did a small wave with her hand and gallantly walked off. I watched her leave as I rubbed my poked cheek. She continued on without turning around, eventually being engulfed by the waves of people.

But even in that congestion, Yukinoshita Haruno could still be seen clearly.

Second Memorandum

Or, it can be **anyone's monologue**.

There was something I came to notice as I continued reading.

To be more specific, it was that I had gone back to the beginning.

These novels certainly did feel similar to me. They even made me think that they were close to my true nature, or perhaps, my disposition that could very well be called malignant.

However, that wasn't it.

A different book after the other, I continued searching, without growing weary, unable to give in. Over and over again, I went through "No Longer Human" and "Run, Melos!"

However, even so, there was something decisively different.

No matter the literary master, no matter the masterpiece, they weren't close at all.

For the other party to have addressed you, to have sympathized with you, be something entirely different was nothing more than despair itself.

Similarities and commonalities were exactly why discrepancies became apparent. They became distinct. Being so identical meant those differences wouldn't be forgiven.

I couldn't forgive myself for having expectations, for thinking I had understood, for thinking I was understood.

Compared to the existence as described in "No Longer Human", I was much more diminutive, cowardly, and vulgar. Dazai didn't realize that he was plagued with a much paltrier problem.

Then, didn't that make me less than something human? Didn't that make me far more lonely and apprehensive than the tyrant king?

Further. To think I utilized influential literature for the sake of attaining answers to my own problems and for the sake of something so extremely selfish and personal made me disgusted with myself. Just how shallow, just how foolish, and just how unsightly I was. The reason why I picked out these books weren't for purification or for my own growth.

All I wanted was to blame myself by way of the truth. I wanted the farce of altruistic self-interest to be seen through.

With the eyes that looked this way from outside.

That’s why I had expectations.

That maybe if it was this book or that maybe if it was that person who was unusually more sensitive to the evils of people, I thought, perhaps, they might find me. Perhaps they might see right through me.

Yet, despite looking at the things that were so close to me, despite seeing right through everything else, I was the only one who wasn’t looked at.

It was so much more painful than being admonished and being looked down on.

Chapter 7

At all times, **Hayama Hayato** is answering expectations.

I closed my book and flopped onto the sofa.

Faint creaking springs shook the quiet living room. Kamakura had been sleeping sideways on the cushion of the kotatsu and his ears stood up.

Komachi had gone off to cram school while my parents were as late as ever in coming home. In this bleak living room, the only ones present were my beloved cat Kamakura and me.

As I was sleeping, I turned my face to the window due to the brightness of the lighting. It was already dark outside and the window was occasionally struck by the freezing, winter winds.

A few days had passed since the academic and career center, but I was still completely clueless regarding Hayama's career path. I tried asking several times, but I received no reply.

I allowed the time to carry on meaninglessly and upon realization, the marathon was tomorrow. The following day after that was when the Prospective Career Path Questionnaire had to be submitted. The end of the month was the cutoff.

I jerked my body which was laying on the sofa into motion and squirmed my way into the kotatsu. My Prospective Career Path Questionnaire which had already been filled was placed on top of the table.

My career path was long decided.

I chose the liberal arts without hesitating between the liberal arts or the sciences. My desired undergraduate department was the private liberal arts, so I had the name of the department written down as well as a decent university that was in line with my academic ability.

Exactly what did I do to decide on my career path? It's actually simple. I chose the liberal arts because the subjects were my strong points. I was poorer in the science subjects and you could say I had tossed them out from the very beginning.

Fortunately for me, though I wasn't sure if I could say to that extent, my specialty was clearly demonstrated in my grades, so I was able to pick my career path without the least bit of concern.

In the first place, I didn't have very many options. That's why I was able to decide through process of elimination.

But flip the situation. How was it for the people who had an abundance of choices to pick from?

For example, Yukinoshita Yukino.

How exactly did she decide?

In retrospect, I should've asked her when I had the chance. As far as simple talents were concerned, the one closest to Hayama Hayato was Yukinoshita.

Despite that, I had utterly excluded the possibility that Yukinoshita's choice could've served as some kind of reference. Of course, thinking about that now was absolutely meaningless. Thinking of that as the reason felt like I was going to be hit with a much more horribly difficult problem.

But now, what I needed to think about was Hayama's choice between the liberal arts and the sciences.

Exactly how did Hayama Hayato make his decision? If I tried to bring up the choices Hayama had, there'd be too many to name. He didn't have the ability to choose by process of elimination nor did he have negative elements to eliminate things by.

The more stories I heard from people, the more incomprehensible it became.

Not only was he proficient in the subjects of the liberal arts and the sciences, he's also implied to be eligible for a sports recommendation. To excel that much meant AO exams or designated school recommendations were plausible outlooks as well.

If he was similar to Totsuka in that he's aware of the undergraduate department he was interested in, I could work backwards. However, I wasn't even at that stage where I could ask that. It'd be a different story if like Zaimokuza, he was conscious of his inability to deal with strangers, but Hayama didn't fit that bill, either.

Thinking about Hayama from the angle of his academic achievements and school conduct was close to impossible.

In which case, I needed to focus my thinking in another direction.

For example, like the circumstances of family that Kawasaki had to deal with. Her decision was brought about because of her feelings for her family. Conversely, for Hayama, he had numerous options to choose from and they weren't things that would obstruct him in any way.

I just couldn't see things like worries or shortcomings for Hayama. This was something both Tobe and I had agreed on. If I were to borrow Ebina-san's words, he was someone who didn't show his weaknesses, didn't hurt anyone, and answered everyone's expectations.

It didn't matter who I asked or who spoke about him, Hayama had nothing but possibilities.

"He could do anything" was Hayama Hayato.

A super human that was cool, kind, wore refreshing smiles, and was equipped with the knowledge of the literary and martial arts.

Everyone carried a similar impression of him. Everyone thought of Hayama Hayato as a good guy.

Everyone?

Now then, was that really the case?

There's just one person. There's just one person who unquestionably didn't think so.

There's just one person who told me clearly.

–I'm not as nice of a guy as you make me out to be.

Should those words be believable, then the person himself had definite misgivings of his own way of being. The only one who didn't consider him as a good person was himself.

Everyone giving praise was sickening. It's even more disgusting when the people responded to that praise in kind. Despite knowing fully well that it's pure hypocrisy, vicious deception, and arrogant self-satisfaction, they continued to answer people's expectations. It's truly revolting.

Someone once said: "Stop turning yourself into a victim." Don't be stupid. Doing things for the sake of answering people's expectations and for the sake of not hurting anyone was the very epitome of self-sacrifice.

"That's how it was long ago," she said. "Nothing changed and things stayed the same", she said.

There were people who lived all their life never going against the intentions of everyone including their parents and could do everything flawlessly. Just what exactly did these people choose? Still placed with expectations, relied on, and continuing to answer them, just what kind of future were these people aiming for?

Yeah, it's completely unbelievable.

Had it been me, I wouldn't have been able to stand it. I'd toss all that bothersome crap away, destroy it all, and make it all pointless. I likely would've felt the expectations from people I didn't even know to be annoying. I wouldn't want to affirm a single strand of hair on people whose names I didn't even know and people who I wasn't even friendly or close with. Be it expectations or praise, I'd probably reject them.

However, Hayama Hayato wouldn't do such a thing. He'd try to be Hayama Hayato until the very end, all for the sake of answering expectations and all for the sake of hurting no one.

Many people forced the idea of expecting virtuosity, kindness, and farces from Hayama Hayato to be natural, insisting on a victim. His pride and his kindness

were also swarmed with demands. Unfortunately, Hayama Hayato was endowed with just the ability to answer all of that.

Yet, there's just one point that Hayama was refusing to yield.

And that's telling anyone his choice between the liberal arts and the sciences.

Despite being the one who answered everyone's expectations.

Just why did Hayama Hayato not tell anyone?

As I was alying down, I looked at the window that vaguely projected the condition of the bright room. It's transparent, yet I was unable to see past it, my gaze staring only at the unreliable mirror image.

Because of the darkness of night, I though the reflected face appeared unwell. I jerked my body into motion and moved my face closer to the window.

As I was doing that, I remembered something from some time ago. "If you were requested something contradictory, what would you do then?" Hayama certainly asked me. "Could you stop doing bothersome things?" He said.

In the end, both Hayama and I covered it up and vaguely answered at the time. One side postponed it to a later day while the other played it off with a meek smile.

But it's probably the same. While the process may be different, the decision to not choose was the same.

In that case, Hayama's answer was already set in stone.

I grabbed my neglected cellphone left on top of the kotatsu.

I spotted the person I was looking for in my small list of recorded numbers and pressed the call button while rising to my feet.

The sound of ringing continued for a moment.

In the time I waited for the other side to pick up, I worried several times whether I should just cut the call. I wasn't sure if it was okay for me to ask this. I could be hated. I could be met with disdain.

But even so, I had no other answer I could think of and this really was the only choice I could take.

Before long, I could hear a reserved voice from the other end.

[…Hello?]

"Hey, it's me. Sorry for calling this late," I said.

The person on the other end, Totsuka Saika, replied with a lively voice.

[Oh no, don't worry about it. It's kind of rare getting a call from you Hachiman, so I was a little surprised.]

I guess he would be. This was probably the first time I properly called him, after all. But I wonder if he'd be even more surprised after hearing what I had to say after this.

I let out a sigh slowly so Totsuka wouldn't hear it and bowed my head despite knowing he couldn't see it.

"…I need a favor."

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The next day after my call with Totsuka was a clear, winter day with minimal winds.

The park which served as the starting point for the marathon saw the gradual gathering of both the first and second year boys and girls. The route the boys were running on was on the coastal lane and back here with the Mihama Bridge.

The distance was long, really long. Anything bigger than three would be counted as a lot for Hachiman-kun who was no good at arithmetic!

Well, regardless, the number of kilometers wouldn't affect what I needed to do.

When we were instructed to line up, we sluggishly began lining up behind the white line drawn at the starting point.

I mingled through people towards the leading group by slimily maneuvering my body like that of a hagfish. Unexpectedly, everyone made way for me. *I wonder why? I guess it's because I was all slimy and stuff?*

This was at most just a school-only marathon. It wasn't a particularly flashy event nor did it affect our grades. Being forced to just run in this cold weather didn't see that many motivated people.

All except for one person.

With the expectation of taking another win this year, Hayama couldn't let this end in an unsightly result. He wasn't allowed to take it easy in public view.

He was at the forefront of the line, a spot that was across from me with several people in between. It's essentially the pole position.

When he stretched his elastic body, girls who were going to watch us take off raised their cheering voices.

Thirty minutes after the boys was when the girls would start. Until then, it looks like they were going to cheer and observe the boys.

Hayama lightly raised his hand to the cheering voices. At the end of where he looked, slightly apart from the girls frolicking energetically was Miura.

Seemingly nervous due to the girls around her, Miura sent only reserved glances his way. Beside her was Ebina-san and Yuigahama. A step further behind them was also Yukinoshita.

And walking up to them was Isshiki.

After noticing Miura, Isshiki bowed to her. Miura nodded back. Isshiki made alternate looks between Hayama and Miura and had a fearless smirk.

Then, she placed her hands to her mouth and yelled out with a large voice, “Hayama-senpai, doooo your best…! Ah, while I’m at it, senpai, too.”

After hearing that, he waved his hand with a wry smile and for some reason, Tobe who was slightly further away replied with an energetic “Yeaaah”.

“No, no, I didn’t mean you Tobe-senpai,” said Isshiki, slightly waving her hands as if saying “no way”.

Miura watched that quietly, but after taking a deep breath in determination, she spat it out along with her voice. “Ha-Hayato… D-Do your best!”

Her reserved voice was so small that it seemed like it could be drowned out by the cheering voices. But Hayama quietly raised his hand and of course, wore a gentle smile.

Miura watched that in a trance and slowly nodded without letting out her voice.

Isshiki watched the both of them in satisfaction on the side and then turned this way again. “…Senpai, do your best too, okaaaay!”

This time it looked like she was looking my way and telling me.

Y-Yeah…Just why is she so stubborn about not saying my name…? I wonder if she doesn’t remember… As I thought about that, Yuigahama who had been watching Isshiki in a daze took a single step forward.

Then, Yuigahama waved her hand. “D-Do your best!”

Her voice was considerably more soft-spoken than Isshiki’s as if she was being conscious of her surroundings, but it definitely reached my ears… *Thank goodness she didn’t call my name. I’m grateful for her consideration at times like these.*

I covertly raised my hand with appreciation and Yuigahama clenched her fist back. Then, next to her, Yukinoshita’s eyes met with mine.

She wordlessly made a small nod. It felt like her mouth moved just slightly, but her voice didn’t reach me.

I wasn’t sure what she said nor did I know who it was directed to.

But well, I felt motivated.

Alrighty, let’s get to work…

I slipped my body further through the crowd and stood in the same starting line as Hayama at the very front. His eyes were facing forward, not looking in my direction.

I rotated my shoulders, stretched my Achilles heel, and took one more step forward.

After completing my preparations, my shoulders were suddenly tapped.

I turned around and Totsuka in his gym clothes was there. His thin legs that stuck out from his shorts moved incessantly, shaking from the cold. But he withheld the quivering and smiled at me. “Hachiman, let’s do our best.”

“Yeah… Totsuka, please.”

There was a lot of clamoring at the start line and lowering my head caused me to bump into someone. But even so, I still bowed my head. Yesterday, what I had asked Totsuka for help with wasn’t exactly something praiseworthy. I felt shameful for requesting Totsuka over the phone.

But Totsuka moved his lightly gripped to his chest and nodded with spirit.

“Yeah, leave it to me!” said Totsuka. “It doesn’t seem like it’s welcomed all that much, though…”

Totsuka had a troubled face and examined the other students. I looked at the group waiting further behind him. They were the members of the tennis club.

“You don’t need to do anything obvious. You just need to make sure the awareness is there. You don’t need to force yourself, either,” I said, and tapped Totsuka’s shoulder. But I quickly retracted my hand being overly worried about whether I had wiped off the sweat or not. *Not good, not good. The more I think about it, the more sweat will come out and it’ll be all slimy…*

I was on the verge of remembering the time during my elementary school outing when a teacher forced me to hold hands with a girl and she ended up hating me because of the sweat in my hand which led to me being dubbed as Froggygaya… Wait a minute, I completely remembered it.

Well, with this cold season, I shouldn’t be producing that much sweat. The sea wind was even prickling my cheeks right now as well.

Suddenly, the wind stopped.

“Oh, Hachiman. So you were here… Funuu, Sir Totsuka seems to be here as well?”

“Ah, Zaimokuza-kun.”

Abruptly making his appearing after pushing through the crowd was Zaimokuza. It looked like he was using his large frame and obstructing the wind for me.

“Hachiman, let us run together.”

“No… Ah, actually, I have something I want you to do.”

“Homuu?” Zaimokuza responded bizarrely while tilting his head.

Since it wasn't something I wanted other people to hear, I moved my body slightly closer to Zaimokuza… *For some reason, it was really warm around him, talk about gross.*

I whispered into his ear and Zaimokuza took a breath going "fushurururu".

"Hmph… I see what you are trying to do. However, I wish to avoid doing anything conspicuous or exhausting…"

"…Well, I guess so."

My request to Zaimokuza was something incredibly burdening. Considering Zaimokuza's athletic ability and weak mentality, he probably wouldn't accept so easily. As a matter of fact, I think I normally turned down any requests he made to me, anyway.

I asked Zaimokuza exactly because my heart wouldn't be hurt even if he's treated like a dirty, old rag, but well, Zaimokuza, too, was a human. My heart may not be the one going through the grinder, but Zaimokuza's would.

He squared his shoulders after I spoke, crossed his arms, and became arrogant. "…I do not mind doing it if you buy me a bowl of super gita ramen from Naritake."

"You sure?" I asked.

Zaimokuza made a resigned, exaggerated sigh. "Good grief, what are you going to do without me…? As they say, you can't keep to yourself with the truth before your eyes."

What an annoying way to put it… I was the one who asked for his help and even I was feeling annoyed. I looked at him with apathetic eyes.

Hesitant about his surroundings, Zaimokuza said, "But, I am not doing anything that will stand out! I refuse the notion of people speaking behind my back or being flamed on the internet! Should I get criticized, I am going to spit out your name for the sake of my own, you got that!" Zaimokuza pointed at me and declared.

When I saw that, a bitter smile slipped out. *Yeah, Zaimokuza-san just has to be this way! He's really trash! Trashy cool!*

"Yeah, that's fine. You'll be a big help. I'll even add batter topping to your ramen for you."

"Hmph, I suppose that will do for my calorie compensation."

Uh, I don't know what calculations you're doing, but this marathon is nowhere enough to burn the calories gained from Naritake…

I gave my thanks to Zaimokuza and Totsuka again and looked towards Hayama who stood before the white line.

He was in a chat with Tobe and the others about something. When he noticed me, he sent me a smile wondering if I had some business.

I shook my head and I looked ahead.

In just a moment, the marathon would start. I could tell without bothering to look at the clock placed in the park.

The noisy voices of the students in the back gradually hushed. The sporadic cheering of the girls also grew smaller.

When everyone went quiet, as if waiting for that moment, someone walked towards the white line drawn on the floor.

"Now, are we ready?"

The one who said that and aimed a pistol at the sky was Hiratsuka-sensei.

Why is Hiratsuka-sensei…? Usually it's a gym teacher that does this. Jeez, this person totally just wants to do things that stand out. Or could it be she just wanted to shoot the pistol, hm?

Hiratsuka-sensei raised the pistol up high and used her other hand to cover her ears. When she placed her finger on the trigger, the male students faced forward and the girls held their breath as they watched.

A few seconds passed and Hiratsuka-sensei slowly opened her mouth. "Take your position… Ready."

In the next instant, the trigger was pulled followed by a gunshot.

Then, we all simultaneously started running as if being launched.

First, I warmed up my legs by slowly beginning my run. My goal was catching up to Hayama.

But numerous individuals lined up beside me went out at top speed as if it was the climax.

The reason for that was because of the incessant flashing of cameras. I wasn't sure if it was for the yearbook or whatever, but for some reason, there were cameras at this marathon.

These idiots who ran with all their strength for the first dozen meters of the marathon just to leave an image were endless. In the end, they probably just wanted to brag saying, "I was first in the middle of it, you know!" Boys were really stupid.

The lot who bet their lives on their starting dash would quickly lose their energy.

That's why the real battle started on the sidewalk we exited to from the park segment.

I quietly avoided the retiring group that fought for the top with their starting dashes and called to Zaimokuza, "Zaimokuza, I'm counting on you."

“Phew, phew, hm…? Y-You got it!”

Zaimokuza’s breathing was already becoming violent, but after he replied, he increased his running speed. But well, since it’s Zaimokuza, it wasn’t all that much faster.

When Hayama who was in front of me and I sprung out at the top, Zaimokuza somehow kept behind us while going “fushuru, fushuru”.

We proceeded like that until the end of the park segment and Hayama turned right and out onto the sidewalk. I followed.

However, Zaimokuza’s limit when running at his best was several hundreds of meters. He gradually began to slow down and when we made it out to the narrowest sidewalk from the park, his speed dropped instantly.

“Haaaaaaa…. No more…”

He gave up and dropped to a near-walking speed dulling the movements of the group behind him. There’s no doubt a large build running lazily in front would be an obstacle.

Thanks to Zaimokuza, we were able to take some distance from the others.

The problem was from this point on.

No matter how large Zaimokuza was, he couldn’t completely seal off the path. Eventually, the group looking to take the top would slip by Zaimokuza on the side and come after us.

As I continuously checked behind me, Totsuka’s tennis club appeared exactly.

My eyes met with Totsuka as I was looking back. We then both nodded.

The course of this marathon was utilizing a general sidewalk. If you walked in a line with three people, you’d completely block off the path.

That’s why I made one request to Totsuka. While I was at the front, try to run together in a tight group as much as possible.

Of course, obvious interference would be a problem. That’s why they just needed to make some space that kept people from wanting to go through by moving slightly to the side, but also giving room for people to overtake them.

There wasn’t a need to block the path entirely.

It’s fine to just have people hesitate mentally from wanting to pass by them.

What would people who didn’t take the marathon seriously do when the group in second place in front of them was running at a similar speed?

It’s likely they wouldn’t overtake them. If it’s people who were content with decent results and didn’t need to take first place, they’d just stick with the second place group, essentially aiming for their one chance.

So far in reality, after getting onto the sidewalk, the top group consisting of Hayama and me saw no chasers from behind. It's possible people would come after us near the final stage of the marathon, but that didn't matter to me at all.

As long we could create the situation where it's just Hayama and me for now, then that's fine.

I glared at Hayama's back, running ahead of me.

The stage was ready. It was made ready for me.

From here on was the beginning of a battle solely for me.

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The winds that blew from the sea numbed my cheeks. When the heat overflowing from the interior touched the cold air, my body pricked with chills.

Every time the soles of my shoe stomped the asphalt, the core of my body received a shock.

I couldn't distinguish the rumblings sounds as the wind or the cracking of my body. Both sounds gradually mixed together with just warmth escaping from my mouth.

I inhaled violently and there was the sharp smell of salt water.

The trees that grew along the coastal lane seemed to be windbreaks. The place we started off from was planted with numerous pine trees, but after passing by that scenery, the trees that resembled white skeletons with shedding leaves stood out.

I shot out my legs even without being conscious of it. It was like the involuntarily pumping of blood from my heart. My heartbeat and my pace were competing, one trying to overtake the other.

My thoughts sporadically came and gone as I continued to run.

I was glad I commuted to school by bike. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to run as well as this despite not being in any sports club. It's not like I was completely bad with marathon training. As a matter of fact, anything other than ball games was my specialty. It's because I could see the game to its end by myself. I didn't have to bother anyone and there's a clear goal. For the rest, all I had to do was absentmindedly occupy my head with worthless things and move my legs.

But today's marathon was a little different.

It felt a lot more agonizing than normal.

It's because my pace was faster than during class. It's because the coldness turned even more relentless and that it's windy. It's because I thought so much last night that I didn't get a wink of sleep.

There were plenty of reasons.

However, the biggest reason was because of the one in front of me, Hayama Hayato.

As someone who seemed clearly used to club activities, Hayama didn't appear exhausted and was making steady progress in his run. His upper body saw no needless and his lower body was stable, a refined form so to speak. I could see why he was able to take the win last year.

On the other hand, I was looking upwards while running without taking into account my pace and was still barely able to keep up with Hayama.

But that would soon be over.

The developments of the race up until now had not moved. As of now, Hayama and I formed the leading group in first place while the second place was occupied by a group with Totsuka and his tennis club as its core. It looks like he was managing their speed of those trailing behind them well. Or perhaps, the athletes were abiding their time until the second half.

There should be even more people after them, but because they were so far away, I couldn't see them even with the turn of my head.

Hayama maintained his steady pace as usual. Our first plan of sabotage must've gone well since we managed to create considerable distance between our groups, so there didn't seem like anyone would come chasing after us.

But the problem was me.

We were still in the first half of the marathon, yet my stamina was nearing its limit.

Since earlier, my sides had been aching, my feet stinging, and my ears tingling. Honestly, I wanted to go home this instant. If I were to eat something, I'd probably vomit it all out.

I somehow managed to run all this way, but unless I did something now, I wasn't likely to be able to continue any further.

As I continued running with my eyes glued to Hayama's back, I suddenly felt the sensation at my feet change. The cold wind blew into hems of my shorts.

We were just about close to the turnaround bridge.

On top of the bridge, teachers were waiting, giving us ribbons in place of checks.

Finally finishing half of the marathon, I was on the verge of releasing a breath of relief, but I forcibly swallowed it down and circulated the oxygen through my lungs.

I couldn't lose my focus here just yet.

I slightly upped my pace in order to chase after Hayama who was several steps further ahead. More jolts ran through my feet that firmly planted onto the floor.

In reality, if I didn't do all of this, I wouldn't be able to catch up to Hayama. Unfortunately, there's an evident gap in our leg strength. Had it just been the two of us running normally, this situation would've been impossible.

That's why I had borrowed Totsuka and Zaimokuza's assistance and ran with all my strength completely neglecting the regulation of my pacing.

It was all for this chance, for this moment.

I violently breathed out countless times and somehow caught up to Hayama.

When I ran up next to him, Hayama had not given me the slightest look for all this time finally turned towards me. His eyes went wide and had a look of slight surprise.

"You're actually keeping up, huh…?" said Hayama, without cutting his breathing.

In contrast, I answered with a fragmented voice. "Yeah, pretty much. If I, thought about, controlling my pace, I wouldn't be able to."

Hayama marginally moved his head to the side and glanced at me. I couldn't help but smirk at his expression that wondered why I'd do something like that. Due to my dry throat, in that moment, I choked. After suppressing my coughs, I slowly opened my mouth.

"It's not like anyone's expecting me to make it to the goal. They won't even care if I retired in the middle."

Truthfully, I wasn't really concerned with placing in the marathon, let alone finishing it. It wasn't a problem as long I could find myself running alone with Hayama Hayato after the turnaround point with no one to bother us. I ran with all my strength, all so we could arrive at this point… Despite all that, the despair of being barely able to keep up with Hayama who was regulating his pace was no joke. My spirit was on the verge of collapsing, but still, I was already past the turnaround point.

What came to mind when people made it through the turnaround point of a painful penance?

Was it despair that there's still another half to go or was it reassurance that it was just another half until they made it? In the case for a majority of people, it'd be one or the other. And the feelings from both choices would form a hole in someone's spirit.

This hole would cause people to realize their fatigue. Source was me. Frankly, a feeling of exhaustion enveloped me when I was about to let out a breath of relief from finally finish the first half and when I looked downwards, my feet naturally grew heavy.

That hole and that fatigue was my chance. When people lost room to move, their true intentions spilled out. In the same way my little sister Komachi did, they'd spit out what's locked deep within their hearts.

That's why I pushed myself up to this point.

In any other normal situation, he'd surely just dismiss my words with a peaceful smile regardless of what I said to him. In that case, I needed to take away his headroom so he couldn't avoid things.

But while Hayama was surprised from me running next to him, he looked calm as he always would. He had a somewhat stern look because he was running, but he didn't look shaken up.

I needed one more push to disrupt Hayama's equilibrium.

Just one thing that could pierce right through Hayama, right through his core.

I forcibly stifled my increasingly heavy breathing. My chest was in pain, but I endured it and smiled, distorting the corners of my mouth.

"…Is Miura convenient for avoiding other girls or what?" I said.

Hayama turned towards me. He glared at me with a sharp glint, breathing out hot breaths in place of swallowing down his hostility. *Yeah, this is the expression I wanted to see.*

He wordlessly looked at me and slightly increased his pace as if deciding to ignore me. I frantically chased after him and hit him with more words.

"How about it? Is she useful?"

To be honest, I knew Miura wasn't a bad person. As someone who had a glimpse of her excessively straightforward personality, uttering something like that pricked my heart somewhat.

In that case, that should apply to the listener as well.

"Be quiet for a bit." Without looking at me, Hayama stated with a voice mixed with irritation. I took a step backwards, encroaching on his overbearing attitude that conflicted with his normal, calm tone.

But I focused again and took a step forward.

"You can't expect me to be quiet just like that… I'm not as nice of guy as you make me out to be, yeah?"

I made a menial smile, borrowing the words I was once told by someone. When I did, Hayama gave me an apathetic look with a condescending smile.

"Is that a joke? I've never thought of you as a good guy."

Because he had stated so bluntly, I lowered the speed at which I was running. Should I lose my concentration here, the gap between us would increase and increase, so I attentively kept my face forward.

“What an unpleasant guy…”

The words slipped out of my mouth and Hayama smiled with some amount of ridicule.

“I don’t want to hear that from you.”

You got that right. I was on the verge of smiling. But my efforts turned out fruitful since I was able to make him react differently from his typical calm self. If so, this was the best timing.

I regulated my breathing again so my voice wouldn’t sound broke as I ran.

“So liberal arts or the sciences, what did you pick?”

“I won’t tell you.”

“Let me guess. You picked the sciences.” I instantly shot back an answer.

Hayama sighed briefly in amazement. “…Do you really think I’m going to answer a two choice question?”

“Fine, I’ll say it differently,” I said. I scantly upped the pace of my legs that shot out. I focused on my heavy thighs, raised it, and overtook Hayama by small, several steps. I moved my head and turned around. “Choose the sciences. I don’t know what you picked nor do I care. But you can still change it, so go on and change it.”

“Huh?”

Hayama showed a stupefied face that was rare for him and pitched forward for an instant. He quickly covered that, lined up with me again, and ran.

“…You blurt out some of the craziest things.”

As if in a panic, even Hayama’s breathing had increased.

“I can’t help it. I need to know which of the two subjects you went with, but… You’re not telling me and a little guesswork isn’t getting me anywhere… That means the only thing I can do is to make you change your choice to the answer I want.”

Hayama Hayato had too many choices that I couldn’t narrow them down. In that case, all I needed to do was effectively erase all of them. If I was the one who could decide which of the two subjects he should pick, then the request from Miura would be satisfied.

“That’s more than just getting your priorities backwards, you know…” Hayama let out a dry laugh.

He might’ve been dumbfounded. But I didn’t blurt it out without reason.

“There’s a merit to changing. Actually, it’s the only way to satisfy your desired conditions.”

“Conditions?” Hayama made a dubious look. Thanks to that, Hayama’s pace lowered. I matched mine with his.

“You told me to stop doing bothersome things, right…? In other words, you want to stop being the Hayama Hayato that everyone wants you to be.”

Hayama abruptly stopped his legs. I noticed that and halted as well.

At that moment, I felt sweat coming out. It’s likely because we had been running directly against the wind that I never even noticed. I wiped the sweat with the sleeve of my jersey and turned to Hayama.

Hayama looked at me with an expression of surprise and despite not being tired, let out a deep sigh.

“And why do you think that?” Hayama gave me an urging look and began walking. I followed.

“Nothing really. I only thought about the things you’d try to throw away. After all, when picking between the liberal arts and the sciences, it’s normal to discard the subjects you’re not good at and the things you don’t want to do.”

If we’re just talking about simple entrance exams, then with Hayama’s academic ability, classes at school shouldn’t have been much of an influence. Prep school was enough for him to understand what was necessary. So in there, the meaning wasn’t about entrance exam strategies or interested universities.

The question was, what was it that Hayama Hayato chose to throw away?

The remaining meaning was the life he’d have as a third year in high school, in other words, his relationships.

“Honestly, choosing the liberal arts or the sciences isn’t a big problem as long you did something about the entrance exams. And yet, you never told anyone. So basically, weren’t you planning to throw away something by keeping quiet?”

Hayama stayed silent, not giving an answer and only continued walking. But I could tell that silence meant I should go on.

“The sciences have less people in the first place, girls too. For now at least, you’d be able to move away from the problem that’s plaguing you. Besides, if your career path’s different, then you should be able to convince everyone and get away from them. If things naturally disappeared, then you can avoid hurting anyone as well as betraying someone’s expectations.” My voice grew huskier due to my dry throat, but I still managed to weave my words and added one final thing. “Your desired conditions can only be satisfied in this way.”

As if bothered by his flowing sweat, Hayama brushed up his hair, wiped it, and then looked towards the sea.

Then, in a small voice, he whispered, “I guess we really wouldn’t have been able to get along, after all…”

“Ah?”

Upon asking him, coming from the rear was the sound of light footsteps. When I turned around, several people from the group in second place were coming after us. Apparently after seeing Hayama beginning to walk, they saw it as an opportunity to take action.

Both Hayama and I watched them go past us.

As we watched their backs grow distant, Hayama opened his mouth.

"Well… You're pretty amazing."

"Oh, so the right answer was the sciences?"

"That's not it. It's just you really are warped," said Hayama, shaking his head.

For him to purposely declare that I was wrong on this multiple-choice question meant the remaining choice was the correct answer. "So it's liberal arts" or so I tried to say, but Hayama interrupted me with a meek, composed voice

"I hate you."

"R-Right…"

Not even giving me the slightest look, his sudden words caused me to lose my voice. Although I wasn't exactly the most likable person, being told upfront like this, refreshingly on top of that, had never happened before. Hayama didn't seem to mind my reaction as he continued looking forward, continued looking into the distance, and continued gradually.

"I absolutely can't stand it when I feel inferior to you. That's why I want you to be my equal. That's why I want to raise you up high, and that just might be it, all so I can accept the things I lose to you in."

"…I see."

I'm sure that was the same for me. I elevated Hayama as a special existence as a means to convince myself, reinforcing a lie all this time, the lie that Hayama Hayato was, without a doubt, an absolutely good guy.

I responded meaninglessly and Hayama then faced me as if it had reached him this time. He wore a smile that was far more refreshing and provocative than any other one.

"That's why I won't do as you say."

"I see."

I nodded and Hayama returned one as well.

It's likely that the choice between the two subjects didn't matter at all to Hayama deep down. To him, either choice didn't make that much of a difference.

That's why, hearing that right now was enough. I could also resolve Miura's consultation. Though, that's not to say the entire problem at hand had disappeared. Anything after this point on was outside my jurisdiction.

“We should get going now,” said Hayama, lightly moving along and beginning his run.

Idiot, I can’t run at all anymore. While thinking that, I more or less chased after Hayama.

That’s because there’s still one more thing I wanted to ask.

I forcibly carried my dragging legs along. Fortunately, my breathing had eased after some rest. My heart was still beating quickly, but I took a deep breath to slow it down.

“…Did you choose the liberal arts because of family problems? Uh, like in a relationship kind of meaning.”

“My family? Did I ever talk to you about them before?”

This speed we ran at was apparently at the level of jogging to Hayama, so right now, his gait and voice were light.

“No, well, I just happened to hear about it…”

My body that was cooled by sweat was further chilled by the cold sea wind. My body stirred from the freezing coldness, an enveloped discomfort, and the strange silence.

But as if no longer concerned with his place in the marathon, he directed me a gaze of interest and looked like he was in contemplation. He then abruptly opened his mouth.

“Are you bothered by the rumor?”

“Huh? No, that’s not really it… It’s just, well, you know, that… Kind of.”

When I fretted over how to explain it, Hayama raised his voice and laughed. Despite running with such a beautiful form, his upper body was shaking bit by bit and then swaying.

“…What’s so funny?” I asked.

Hayama wiped his eyes forcibly. “Nothing, sorry. You don’t need to worry about it. I’ll make sure it goes away.”

“Ahh, if you can, that’d help me a lot. I can’t stand how tense the club is right now.”

In the time we had that conversation, I could hear the breathing of another student approaching my side. I turned around once and then back to the front. The ones that passed us should’ve put some considerable distance from us already.

My legs wouldn’t move as I wanted them as if they were attached with heavy lead.

“Looks like they got away pretty far… I guess we should take it easy. Sorry for screwing up your successive win,” I said, proposing.

However, Hayama shook his head. He shook his hands like a sort of light stretch and then grinned. “…No, I’ll win… That’s me, after all.”

He stated in such a way, that winning, that he’d answer everyone’s expectations, and that he’d act as Hayama Hayato all the way until the end, as if that was him.

Hayama steadily increased his pace, taking a several steps ahead of me as I was running sluggishly, and turned around. “Besides, I don’t want to lose to you.”

He left with those words and ran off.

Further and further, I was left behind.

There wasn’t much remaining of my spare energy to chase after him and all I could do was watch him leave. Hayama Hayato had blurted out the answer I wasn’t able to, dreamed of the possibilities that I couldn’t believe in, and went out into the distance.

Damn it, aren’t you cool or what?
Don’t tell me he’s a sore loser, too? I had that idiotic impression as I ran and my right leg collided with my left calf.

Unable to catch my fall, I collapsed onto the floor. I lay there on my back, looking up at the sky.

My white breaths blended with the thoroughly blue winter sky overhead.

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In the end, the marathon quietly progressed with no changes to my plans of laying or sleeping on the ground.

After my collapse, I stayed on my back for a while. Totsuka did come to help me up, but since I couldn’t bother him more than I already had, I had him go on ahead. I managed to make it to the goal, dragging my hurt leg by myself.

For the most part, I didn’t place last, but for the last spurt, I had joined the very last group of the marathon and made frantic efforts at the moment of the goal. It’s to the point I checked around wondering, “I don’t need to make it to the goal anymore, right…?” By the way, the one who answered me was Zaimokuza who was running together with me at the end.

When we finished running, my trembling knees gave in and this was a good time for Nico Nico Nii…[1]

I checked my condition after falling over and was in terrible shape.

My knees and lower leg were grazed, my shorts were messy with mud, I was cramping around my butt area, my side was aching the entire time, and trying to find any part that didn’t hurt was difficult. In the first place, I was always a painful child, so if I could get even more hurt than this, it might actually be worth studying (it hurts).

If it wasn't for cheering myself up halfway through with "Do your best ♡, do your best ♡", I think my life would've turned into zero.

Of course, there's no one waiting for me at the goal.

Rather, there's just one gym teacher regretfully present near the goal site while everyone else seemed to be gathered at the square of the park.

I went over there to take a peek and they were right in the middle of a public ceremony event.

Usually, a marathon didn't have an awards ceremony like this, but seeing that Isshiki was serving as the host of the event, the student council probably planned it in a hurry. Surprisingly, she was a capable individual. Isshiki Iroha was one to be feared.

"Now then, now that the results have been presented, we'd like to hear a general comment from our winners!" Isshiki spoke happily, holding a microphone that looked like she brought from the student council room. In the meantime, seeing the vice president adjust the speakers was a little surreal.

I quickly surveyed the area and the first and second year boys and girls couldn't be distinguished from each other and were gathered here at the square of the park. People from my class such as Yuigahama, Miura, Ebina-san, Tobe, and Totsuka were in there as well.

As I watched from afar, Isshiki called forth the winner. "The winner, Hayama Hayato-san, please come up to the stage!"

When Hayama was called, he ascended onto the improvised stage wearing a laurel wreath. The gallery erupted into cheers. *Actually, I can't believe he seriously won…*

"Hayama-senpai, congratulations for winning! I totally knew you were going to win, you knooow!"

"Thank you."

Isshiki gave him a clear, bias greeting and Hayama answered with a refreshing smile.

"Now then, please give us a comment."

After handing the microphone to Hayama, he was given applause and hand whistles followed by the start of the HA-YA-TO call. When she handed the microphone to Hayama, what followed were applause and hand whistling, and the start of the HA-YA-TO call. Tobe's interjections of "Heeeeeya", "Yeaaaaaah", and "Yeah, yeah, yeah!" were incredibly annoying.

He waved at them with an embarrassed smile and began speaking.

"It was looking a little close in the middle of the marathon, but thanks to my good rivals and everyone's cheering, I was able to make it to the end. Thank you very much," said Hayama, stating without hesitation. He then paused for a

moment. After spotting Miura in the crowd, he waved at her. “Especially Yumiko and Iroha… Thank you.”

Then, the cheering voices swelled even louder. Oooka whistled with his fingers while Yamato sent magnificent applause. As for Miura and Isshiki, they turned stiff from having their names suddenly called, but gradually started twisting their bodies in embarrassment and hung their heads with flushed cheeks. Yuigahama kindly patted Miura’s shoulders.

When the onlookers saw Hayama’s warm gaze and the two’s reactions, they grew noisy. *I see, so this is what he meant by making it go away.*

The winner continued further with his comment.

“After this, we’ll focus on our efforts on our club and do our best for our last tournament. Also, to the soccer members today, it seems like a lot of you ended up with poor results, so I’ll be whipping you guys into shape.”

Hayama directed a malicious smile at Tobe and his group. Tobe fell backwards with a “Whooooa~”.

“Hayato-kuuun, ya can’t do that! You gotta let us know that beforehand!”

Tobe raised his natural voice so it didn’t lose to the microphone and everyone exploded into “dowahaha” laughter. *What a kind world this is…*

“Okaaaay, thank you very much. And that was our winner, Hayama Hayato-san. Okay, round of applause… We don’t really need to bother with second place and the rest, right?”

Slipping in the loud applause was Isshiki’s needless confirmation to the vice president which got picked up entirely by the microphone. *What the heck is she doing…?*

Isshiki somehow managed to gloss over her slip and Hayama who descended down the stage had a friendly chat with Miura and the others.

The sense of distance they had before was no longer there. In fact, Miura was shrinking back, embarrassed by the gazes of the surroundings, and was hiding behind Yuigahama and Ebina-san’s back.

After making sure of that, I left the square of the park.

Without a doubt, I had seen with my own eyes Hayama Hayato’s act of being Hayama Hayato. Perhaps it could’ve just been his farce of altruistic self-interest specialized in answering people’s expectations, but I had no complaints considering how perfectly he handled it.

When I left the square, I encountered a group of people dismissing themselves at the same time. The boys and girls were having a trifling chat.

“Yeah, that rumor was just a lie, after all!” “Hayama-kun and Miura-san get along really well!” Watching them with a sidelong glance, I dragged my staggering leg towards the school’s infirmary.

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The school building was deserted and it felt much colder than it did at the square earlier.

A lot of the students were either still at the square for the marathon or freely spending their time elsewhere.

I changed into my indoor shoes and walked in the empty hallway of the special building. Just the act of doing that caused light pulsing stings to my leg.

I knocked on the door of the infirmary.

"Come in."

I was answered with a familiar sounding voice. *This voice is…* As I thought, I opened the door and as I had anticipated, the one ahead was Yukinoshita. Still wearing her track uniform and sitting in a chair, she looked at me blankly.

"Hikigaya-kun…? I thought for sure you were Yuigahama-san."

"If you're looking for Yuigahama, she's still at the park. Then again, what are you doing here?"

"I took a short rest and they forced me to drop out…" said Yukinoshita, gritting her teeth. Apparently she was booted out of the marathon while in the middle of a break. After seeing her frustration, it looked like she was actually intending to finish it, huh…?

"Hikigaya-kun…" She glanced at my leg and her eyes narrowed in pain. "You were hurt?"

"Yeah, just a little."

I couldn't possibly tell her my legs collided into each other. I mean, it's lame. Plus, you know, it'd be as if I was like the victim of domestic violence or something. Something like, "That's not it! This just happened because I fell over!" I couldn't have people be needlessly concerned that I was involved in domestic violence, either.

"You could have gotten treated at the goal. The nurse should have gone over there."

"No one was there when I finished…" I answered.

Yukinoshita placed her hand to her chin in contemplation of something. "I see. You have awful timing, or maybe awful luck, or awful eyes, or perhaps–"

"My personality, my attitude, everything about me is awful. Anyway, we can use these disinfectants and stuff, right?" I asked her while rummaging through the unlocked medicine cabinet.

Yukinoshita sighed. "…You seem awfully clumsy as well." She stood up, motioned me away from the medicine cabinet with just her hands. She took the disinfectant and bandage and pointed at the seat in front of her. "Sit over there."

“Uh, I can treat myself.”

“Just sit down.”

While unsatisfied, I took a seat as I was told for now. When I did, Yukinoshita sat in the seat she was in earlier and moved to the front of me.

She placed her hand on my leg and began sterilizing the open wound. There was the sharp smell of antiseptic solution. Then, slightly stooping over, Yukinoshita’s head came closer along with the gentle fragrance of SABON.

For every dab of the piece of cotton damped with disinfectant on my open wound, a sweet, itchy pain pulsated. I wasn’t particularly accustomed to this kind of medical treatment. Because she timidly touched at my wound, I occasionally felt a sting in my injury from the disinfectant.

“Hey, um, i-it stings, you know…”

“Of course it does, I’m disinfecting the wound. It’s only natural that it’s effective on you, Hikigaya-kun.”

“Uh huh, let’s stop treating people like bacteria, okay?”

“It’s proof that it’s working. Bear with it.”

Look here, the good medicine tastes bitter theory, was it? You can’t expect me to believe that. *If being bitter was enough, wouldn’t that mean my life is the best thing ever?*

Although I brought it up, Yukinoshita’s touch grew softer, seemingly being somewhat considerate of me, and her hand treatment became careful. This time it felt so ticklish that I had to restrain my body from leaping.

Until she finished disinfecting the area where the abrasion of my injury was, we were both quiet. I gradually grew used to the prickling pain and my stiff body started to relax. Yukinoshita spun the bandage once, then twice, and slowly opened her mouth.

“It seems you ran with Hayama-kun… Did you hear anything from him?”

“Yeah… At the very least, it’s not the sciences, probably,” I answered oddly, unable to think of any other way to phrase it.

Yukinoshita chuckled. “That’s a strange way to put it… All done.”

Yukinoshita breathed out in satisfaction and lifted her face. When she did, Yukinoshita’s face, which had been stooping over, became so close to mine to the point we were almost touching.

“……”

Both of us were locked stiff in that position.

Her exposed skin that was as white as a blanket of snow. Her wet, damp black pupils. Her long eyelashes that momentarily shook with a blink. The finely shaped

bridge of her nose. The smiling shape of her mouth along with the escaping of breaths.

When Yukinoshita's thin shoulders quivered, her long, glossy hair flowed.

I frantically looked up at the ceiling, fell backwards with my body, and made some distance. Somewhere in that moment, I felt a sting from my injury.

"…Ahh, thanks for this."

"…Not at all. It's no big deal."

After I expressed my gratitude in a way to smooth things over, Yukinoshita adjusted her sitting and turned her face away.

At that point, the infirmary was submerged in silence.

With nothing to do, I looked at the bandage that she wrapped for me earlier. Upon looking, the knot of the bandage was tied in the shape of a small ribbon… *So by "all done", she meant this, huh? Don't they have those metal clippings to fasten the bandages? Use those. What's with this ribbon…? It sure is cute.*

As I looked at the ribbon, I slipped out a smile. I started to feel somewhat better.

I pulled my chair, took a shallow seat, and stretched my back. Yukinoshita tilted her head finding my posture to be strange.

Right now, I felt I wanted to ask her.

"…Hey. Can I ask you what you're doing for your career?" I asked.

Yukinoshita let out a breath as if in bewilderment. Her hand which she placed on her chin to think was brought down to her chest and stopped.

"I'm enrolled in International Liberal Arts course, so it shouldn't matter whether I choose one or the other…"

"…You're right. I just wanted to try asking. Don't worry about it."

It was an answer I had somewhat expected, but even so, I was satisfied, though it might've been self-satisfaction instead.

I stated with the intention of glossing it over, but Yukinoshita placed her idle hands on her lap and looked at me with a slightly downcast expression.

"This is the first time you've asked me something like that, isn't it?"

"Really?"

I knew that, but I pretended not to.

For all this time, there were plenty of opportunities to ask personal things like that, but I had drawn a line that I swore not to step over. It's because I thought I wouldn't be forgiven if I did.

Yukinoshita coughed as if having a difficult time speaking and looked into my eyes at an oblique angle in examination. "…For now, I decided on liberal arts."

"I see."

"Yes. That's why… we're still together for the time being," said Yukinoshita, smiling. It was a smile as though she was a little girl on the day before an outing.

"Well, as far as liberal arts are concerned."

I chose the liberal arts and there's no doubt Yuigahama did as well.

Just how much meaning that division had, I didn't know. Ultimately, we'd eventually embark to different places and to different worlds. In the same way a group of three when younger couldn't stay together forever. As time continued on, the way things ought to be would undoubtedly change.

What didn't change were the truths of the past. That may tie in with responsibility, but it could also be something that could keep things in place. As long that one step over the line left a footprint, then that's fine.

"Alright, I'll be heading back to class now."

"Sure. See you later."

Together with her brief response, she lifted her hand just a little bit and shook it as helplessly as ever. I nodded to her and placed my hand on the door of the infirmary.

The door then shook. I opened the door, wondering where exactly the wind was coming in from, and a person was standing in front of me.

"Whoa… freaked me out there…"

My chest thumped from the sudden appearance of a figure and I suppressed it. The person in front of me was Yuigahama Yui and her expression was stiff as well, stumbling with her words.

"…Ah, Hikki."

"Yuigahama… Did you just get here?"

"Eh, ah, yeah. Yeah, I did! I was going to knock…"

When I asked her, as if the surprise from earlier made her late, she responded in a panic. She then lightly closed her eyes, adjusted her breathing and lifted her face.

"Yukinooon! Sorry for being late!" She said with a loud voice and entered the infirmary and sat across Yukinoshita. Yukinoshita had a slightly puzzled face but quickly shook her head and smiled at Yuighaama.

"I don't mind. I wasn't bored."

"Okay, that's good… Ah, I know. Since Hikki's here, now's a good time."

Yuigahama turned to me and beckoned me over with her hand.

Well, I couldn't leave the door left open like this. There's just one wall partitioning the room from the hallway, yet the hallway was extremely chilly.

I entered the infirmary once again and I was enveloped with the warm air. Yuigahama moved her seat next to Yukinoshita, sitting side by side in front of the heater, the source of the warmth.

"We need to tell Yumiko today about the request, right? But there's a party after this and Yumiko is heading directly there. What should we do?"

In contrast to Yuigahama who spoke in a hurry, Yukinoshita placed her hand to her chin and began thinking.

"…Then on our way home, it seems we'll have to go to Miura-san and speak with her."

"Sounds right."

"At least say you're going to the party!" Yuigahama shrieked in sorrow.

Yukinoshita and I exchanged looks. We were both used to this pattern. We both nodded and spoke simultaneously.

"Alright, if we can go, we'll go."

"Yes, we'll decide on the flow of things."

"In the end, you guys aren't just going to go, you know!?"

After letting out an exhausted sigh, she calmly opened her mouth.

"Okay, well, but, compared to before, I guess it's better…" said Yuigahama, and she relocated her stool with casters next to Yukinoshita.

"Okay, then let's all go together…! Everyone… together." She repeated her mutters and moved her body closer to Yukinoshita.

"…So stuffy." Yukinoshita frowned as if the heating in front of her was the cause. But she didn't forcibly pull Yuigahama off of her and stayed as is. Yuigahama didn't seem intent on moving from here, either. In front of the heater, she began making a comfortable, happy face.

I'm pretty sure the school nurse is going to come back eventually and chase us out ...

Well, until then, I guess I'll stay here in this warm room, too.

Chapter 8

And so, **their past and future** become one and conclude in the present.

Once the sun had completely set, the temperatures plummeted and the winds grew fiercer. As we walked the path along the public park towards the station from school, the trees with shedding leaves shook from the northern winds.

I adjusted the collars of my coat and buried the lower half of my face into my scarf. Walking ahead of me was Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and Miura. Today's after-school club activities were suspended so we could make a report on the consultation we accepted from Miura and we accompanied her on the way to the after-party.

As Miura's tartan scarf and proud curly hair fluttered with the wind, she muttered, "Oh… so Hayato's picking the liberal arts."

"Uh huh. That's the feeling we got at least," said Yuigahama, anxiously fiddling with the bun of her hair.

Well, it's word of mouth information, so the reporter wasn't exactly believable as a source, see. It's fine to lack confidence, yep.

Even after hearing that, Miura kicked the ground with her slipped on loafers and indifferently looked up at the sky. "Okay, maybe I'll just go with that, too."

"Should you be choosing so easily like that?"

Yukinoshita's voice, while soft, also sounded critical. Without turning towards Yukinoshita and still gazing up at the darkness, Miura walked on as if observing the stars.

"I mean, I don't really have anything I want to do. I could just, you know, go to prep school if I really have to take the sciences, right?"

I think that'd only work out if you had Hayama's level of academics, but what about Miura? *Aren't you being a little too optimistic?* I wasn't the only one with this thought. Yukinoshita had a sullen face as well. By the way, Yuigahama was nodding her head. *The one who should be the most concerned with their academic level is you, you know…*

But my concern was apparently needless.

"I can just take some time off for the exams… But I can't really do that with this," said Miura. She stopped, lifted her heels as if stretching her back and held her hands together at her back. I couldn't see what expression she had from behind. However, I had the feeling her eyes were as transparent as the winter sky.

“Just so you know, you’ve got another thing coming if you’re going to stick with *that*.”

“Hikki, shush!” Yuigahama nudged me with her elbow as if chiding me.

Miura moved just her neck and glared at me. “Huh? I don’t need to hear that from you, Hikio.”

“R-Right…”

Waah… Miura-tan, you’re sooo scary… Miura glared at me for a moment, but eventually suppressed her sharp look and took another step. With a small voice as if making a rebuttal to me, she mumbled.

“It’s just… well… see, even including the annoying stuff,” said Miura, turning around as if making a spin. The hems of her coat and her glossy blonde hair lightly danced. Her body still turning in motion, she wore a slightly embarrassed grin. “I guess it’s okay, after all.”

I couldn’t help but be in awe when she said that with such a nice smile. To think you could state it so simply. It’s a pure aspiration exactly because it’s so simplistic, so concise and so straightforward.

For a short while, I watched that smile in a daze. When she noticed my gaze, Miura retracted her smile and briskly began walking in displeasure.

“Oh… with just that, it’s okay. So it was that simple…”

When I turned around to the muttering voice, Yuigahama was squeezing the bosom of her coat. Standing next to her, Yukinoshita was looking at Miura with a stunned expression.

However, it might not have been something to be surprised around. Even during the field trip, Miura had grasped Hayama and Ebina-san’s intentions. Perhaps, those soft emotions she had could even be called genuine… Don’t forget Miura-san was a holder of mother qualities, too!

Miura turned back noticing that we were at a stand-still.

“Yui, thanks.” She faced Yuigahama and lightly tapped her shoulders. Then, she rotated just her neck and gave me a look. “Ahh, Hikio, too.”

She doesn’t even care… I was being treated like a complete supplement, not to mention my name isn’t Hikio. Well, that’s fine too.

“Also… Yukinoshita-san? You… um, you know, it’s like…” Miura shifted her gaze from me to Yukinoshita. She chewed her words anxiously, but eventually looking determined, she glared at Yukinoshita directly and abruptly bowed her head. “Sorry.”

Yukinoshita blinked with a blank expression, but after breathing out with a small smile, she flicked away her hair at her shoulders with her mitten-covered hands.

“It doesn’t bother me. Rather, I’d like to praise your audacity for coming directly at me.”

“Tch, what’s with that ego? So irritating… I totally apologized for nothing.”

Their words seemed hostile, but both of their voices were soft.

Yuigahama looked at them with anxiety, but unable to hold it in any longer, jumped at Yukinoshita and Miura. “Okay! Then let’s all go to the after-party.”

“I…”

Held by Yuigahama, Yukinoshita twisted her body as if trying to turn down the invitation. Miura, who was in Yuigahama’s arms as well, glanced at Yukinoshita and said, “Why don’t you come, too?”

“…I suppose so. Just for a little then.”

Her hesitation lasted for only a moment. Yukinoshita formed a small smile and answered. Miura averted her face.

The location for the after-party that we relocated to was a fancy and hip looking store, an English-styled pub. In there, the students revolving around Hayama’s group and Isshiki were frolicking noisily.

Judging from their liveliness, it looked more like Hayama’s victory celebration than an after-party. Including Hayama’s group, Isshiki, Totsuka and his group, and for some reason, Zaimokuza was in there.

Upon entering the store, Miura promptly went to Hayama. Yuigahama was perplexed at what to do, but when Yukinoshita nodded to her, she made a reluctant smile and went after Miura.

With the two of us remaining, Yukinoshita and I briefly ordered our drinks and leaned against the end of the bar counter.

“Thank you for your work.”

“Mm, yeah.”

Yukinoshita stood next to me and lifted her glass and I raised mine to a similar height. We weren’t accustomed to this kind of boisterous atmosphere, but it’s Yukinoshita and me. I’d say watching them from the corner was just about the perfect distance for all of us.

For a moment longer, we continued watching everyone silently, but as if noticing our gaze, Hayama who had went around made his way to us. *Going through the formalities as the leading actor sure seems tough…*

“Hey there… Thanks for coming.”

Yukinoshita shook her head indicating it’s not a big deal and I nodded in agreement. As I thought about whether it’d be better to congratulate him, Hayama quietly lowered his head.

“Sorry… for all the trouble I’ve caused you… Like that rumor… and other things.”

Yukinoshita choked on her voice in bewilderment. But that was only for an instant as she quickly assumed a firm attitude and reiterated what she had stated in the clubroom.

“It wasn’t that big of a deal. It’s a trivial matter compared to back then.”

“Back then, huh?” Hayama muttered with a shameful expression.

Seeing that, Yukinoshita’s expression grew cloudy as well.

“…I understand it somewhat now. I’m sure we could’ve handled the situation a lot better. That’s what I believe I caused you trouble as well… I’m sorry.” This time, Yukinoshita bowed her head. When she lifted her head, with eyes that looked nostalgically into the far past, she added, “But I’m grateful that you were looking out for me.”

Hayama’s expression was filled with surprise. Taken aback, he made a fixed gaze at Yukinoshita. “…You’ve changed a little.”

“I wonder about that. There are just a lot of things different now from back then,” said Yukinoshita, and she moved her gaze towards Yuigahama. Then, she glanced at me.

Feeling restless from having heard something I wasn’t supposed to, I instinctively averted my eyes.

Yukinoshita breathed out as if smiling and turned to Hayama. “You shouldn’t let the past tie you down anymore… There’s no need to force yourself to chase after someone.”

“…That clearly includes me too,” I said.

Hayama smiled, somehow triumphantly.

Walking up from behind Hayama was Yuigahama. A little further behind her was Totsuka following her. Intoxicated by the lively atmosphere in the store, Yuigahama wrapped herself around Yukinoshita’s arm.

“Yukinon, the food’s here! There’s, like, a lot of chicken! They’re all super whole roasted!”

“It’s really amazing! C’mon Hachiman, you should come over too!” Totsuka made a perky smile.

I appreciated his invitation since I was feeling awkward being there. “Yeah!” I replied twice energetically and just as I was about to head over with Totsuka, Hayama stopped me lightly with his hand.

“We’ll be over there in a bit… Right, Hikigaya?” said Hayama, and looked at Totsuka and Yuigahama with a meek smile.

Yuigahama nodded. “Okay, we’ll be waiting over there!”

She then forcibly dragged Yukinoshita along. Totsuka lightly waved his hand and returned to his seat. *Ahh… I wanted to peck at chicken with Totsuka, too…*

As I watched the three of them leave, Hayama shook his glass followed by the sound of clanging ice.

"Yeah, she really did change a little… It doesn't look like she's chasing after Haruno-san's shadow anymore." Hayama's gaze that followed Yukinoshita quietly narrowed and was sharp. His voice afterwards was somber. "…But that's all there is to it."

"Sounds fine to me," I answered, not giving it any thought. For Yukinoshita, I'm sure it was a part of her growth. It's likely that she had been constantly compared to the existence that surpassed her own. Continuing to chase after Haruno-san's shadow and trying to grab ahold of something that was different from Haruno-san was a testimony of her struggle. In that case, I felt it was something to be proud of.

But Hayama looked at me in amazement. He painfully swallowed the content of his glass cup and asked solemnly, "…You haven't noticed?"

"Notice what?"

"Well, if you don't get it, then that's fine too…"

"That's an irritating thing to say."

"I was told in the same way a lot back then, so it just naturally came out similarly." Hayama wryly smiled.

That way of speaking certainly did resemble how that person would speak.

When Yuigahama and the others arrived at their seats, Miura and Isshiki waved their hands at Hayama. They were probably telling him to hurry on over. Hayama lightly waved back and just as he was about to head back, he went "ah" as if recalling something and resumed his original position and spoke to me.

"Right. I forgot to tell you something."

"Huh?"

"It's a follow-up to your explanation. It's about the reason why I didn't tell anyone my decision between the sciences and the liberal arts. It wasn't because I wanted to cut off my relationships. Relationships won't reset from moving up a year or going on to college."

"No, they definitely will."

"That applies only to you, Hikigaya. I'm different from you."

"…Yeah, that so. Well, what's the reason then?"

When I asked Hayama who shrugged his shoulders with a mocking tone, he gulped down the content of his glass and breathed out. As if he was reciting in front of a grave with a slightly solitary face, he slowly opened his mouth.

“Picking the only possible option when there’s nothing else can’t be called my own decision.”

It’s when he explained that I finally understood. It wasn’t that Hayama didn’t say anything about his career path.

It’s that he couldn’t. Even not saying anything wasn’t his own volition.

After continuing to answer expectations and wishes for so long, he could only interpret those as conformist actions. He wasn’t allowed to hold onto anything but the most optimal solution. Although he had told Tobe that he’d regret not choosing for himself, the one who actually had regretted it was, without a doubt, Hayama. Repentance was exactly what that was.

In that way, Hayama would continue to answer people’s expectations. From this point on, he’d do so with his own will.

“That’s why, I’ll be the only one who doesn’t deny it.” “I need to show that there’s someone who isn’t forcing expectations.”

It’s because he felt that brazen rejection alone was what it meant to truly understand and that cold indifference itself was kindness. To him, the affirmation of those who didn’t understand him were nothing but shackles to him.

“I also forgot to tell you something… I hate you too,” I said as I turned my face away.

Hayama looked at me in wonder for a moment, but suddenly laughed.

“I see. That might be the first time I was told that face-to-face.” Hayama suppressed his laughter and stated in satisfaction. This time, however, he took a step forward from the bar counter. “But even so… I won’t choose anything. I want to believe that’s the best way.”

He added, “It’s just self-gratifcation for me” and smiled, going back to where he was originally.

But I couldn’t smile.

If the answer that Hayama Hayato gave was criticized as insincere, then surely, that individual would give a satisfying answer. He’d definitely give an answer that’s different from Hayama Hayato’s.

I gulped down the ginger ale I had in my hand and looked towards where everyone was sitting.

A prickling bitterness remained in the depths of my throat.

Third Memorandum

If so, just **whose monologue** was it?

I don’t know how many times I’ve read through it.

Long ago, I felt I had a connection with the shepherd of the village.

Justice, sincerity, and love. But when I think about them, they’re worthless. Everything about them was absolutely laughable.

Every time I had that feeling, there were sudden echoes.

I’m[1] being relied on. I’m being relied on.

Lending my ears to those words that I thought to be the sweet whispers of a devil brought my gradual transformation into a monster of reliance.

It’s when you came to realize your own evil that you become desperate to suppress it. In masking it away, others saw it as the truth, and eventually, it became something natural to you that it turned into the truth itself.

I was thrown into an endless loop of doubt as to whether if that’s really all. I could no longer make the distinction on my own.

That’s why, perhaps, I had been waiting for that person who could surely see right through me.

Along the way, I began to sympathize with the evil tyrant king.

“He cannot trust people”, or so.

But anyone knew how the conclusion of the story went.

However.

Just how exactly did the actual end turn out?

The king said, “The heart of man is not to be relied on.”

Did the evil tyrant king, even to this day, still not trust in the existence of that truth and that sincerity?

Was it because he had lost all his trust after trying them and he became unable to rely on them despite their obvious transparency that he thought he wanted to try again by being a part of them, that he wanted to try destroying them?

If your cheeks must be struck as atonement for holding doubt, then who was the person that needed to be struck the most?

I shut the book and looked outside the window.

The sun had already sunk far past the horizon, the final fragment of the afterglow disappearing in succession.

Sincerity. Or perhaps, the truth.

If you couldn’t call those empty delusions, then what else could you call them?

Do genuine things really exist?

Chapter 9

However, **Yukinoshita Haruno** states as such.

I closed my unfinished book over my bookmark, tossed it aside on the table, and lifted my face. The sight of people enjoying their day off going back and forth was easily visible from the open café near Chiba Station.

Of all places, why an open café at the end of the month on a cloudy and freezing day? I put on my coat again and made a reproachful stare. At the end of my stare, the person I had been waiting for was walking my way with a waving hand. After a quick order of coffee at the register, that person took a seat in front of me.

"Sorry for the wait!"

The person I was meeting with was Yukinoshita Haruno and she spoke to me in the same happy mood she had when she suddenly called me last night.

I was usually one to ignore calls from unknown numbers, but after incessant calls, I gave in. I picked up thinking it might've been something urgent, but after just informing me of a meeting place and time, the line was cut and here I was. I tried calling back immediately to voice my refusal, but she didn't even pick up…

"…Um, why do you know my number?"

"I got it from Hayato," said Haruno-san, not showing an ounce of shyness with a wink ☆. *Oh yeah, I gave my number to Hayama at some point, didn't I? That bastard… He went and blabbered it to the one person who mustn't be told the most…*

But nothing could be done now that she knew. I made a firm oath in my heart to block all communication from her from this day onwards and decided to question her business for calling me out today. "Do you need something from me?"

Seemingly not fond of jumping into the heart of the matter, Haruno-san's cheeks swelled indignantly and she gave me a squint. "We're finally on a date, don't be such a party-pooper. Your attitude's soooo different from the time with Gahama-chan."

"Da… No, that's not what it was, at all, and neither is this." I answered while in a fluster.

Haruno-san smiled with a composed appearance and pointed at herself. "Hikigaya-kun, are you not into beautiful onee-sans like me?"

"I don't believe a thing can be done if you end up hating beauties who can say things like that about themselves." I answered.

After Haruno-san nodded, she gave me an upward glance and poked back. “But you hate girls who pretend as if they’re not a lot more, right?”

“…True.”

Crap, she got me… Though truthfully, I felt those kinds of girls really were a little out there for me.

Well, if I were to be honest about it… I definitely preferred pretty onee-sans a lot more!

But concerning Yukinoshita Haruno, I had other sentiments that were much stronger.

This person frightens me. It’s not just because of her perfect mask, but that unrelenting inner face that she wouldn’t bother to hide once it’s been seen through. And lastly, her eyes which indicated that there’s something else hidden in her depths. That’s why I covertly averted my gaze and again, asked, “But really, since you went through the trouble of calling me out here, do you have some business with me?”

“Ah, right, right. I was thinking of checking your answer as I promised. Did you ask Yukino-chan what her career path is?”

“…For the most part, I know what it is, but it wouldn’t be very fair for me to say it.”

“Oh, what a dutiful lad. But I see. So if it’s Hikigaya-kun, she’ll properly tell you. Mmhmm… Yukino-chan trusts you quite a bit, doesn’t she?” said Haruno-san, smirking as though indicating how pleasant that was.

Having someone else consider it as such was oddly embarrassing. Since the conversation we had in the infirmary room came to mind at the same time, I found myself fanning my cheeks.

“…You can’t really call that trust, can you?”

“Oh, wow. So you *do* get it.”

My voice was taken away. Although I had intended a casual reply, the words Yukinoshita Haruno apathetically stated without a smile resounded against my eardrums.

After taking a sip of her coffee, Haruno-san traced the rim of the cup and looked at me with somber eyes.

“That’s right. That isn’t anything remotely like trust… It’s something much more horrible.” She smiled, only her lips appearing tender. But the quality of her cold voice made her appear as someone else entirely from earlier. “Nothing’s changed and that child thinks that’s fine. I mean, sure, that part is also what makes her adorable, but… I *really*don’t like that.”

Her beautiful, slender countenance twisted inhumanely. Although her eyes appeared to be gazing into me, who sat directly across from her, it’s as though she

wasn't actually perceiving someone like me at all. I wanted to pull her back to this side and I let out my voice with my thoughts in disarray.

"If it isn't trust… what else could it be?"

"Who knows? But at the very least…" Haruno-san overtly shrugged her shoulders, making a smile for just an instant, and focused on me. "You can't call it something genuine… Those were your words, right?"

I certainly did say those words. But still without a proper grasp of their meaning and significance, they were simply groundless words of what I believed in.

Something genuine. That's to say, the truth, or perhaps sincerity. Just exactly which of them you could call genuine, I still had yet to understand.

"I wonder if genuine things really exist…" Haruno-san looked overhead at the winter sky with suspended thick clouds and muttered. Where was her question that was tinged with a faint ring of loneliness directed at?

Suddenly, I thought back. A certain individual said that it's an enclosed happiness. A certain individual asked if I hadn't noticed it. And lastly, the Yukinoshita Haruno before me had doubts, doubts as to whether truth or sincerity really existed.

I reached out to the book that was left on the table with my quivering hand and softly touched it.

The book had turned cold from being constantly exposed to the wind and I became hesitant in continuing it further and in knowing how it would end.

End

Afterword

Good evening, Watari Wataru here.

It's fall already! A fall for readers, a fall for sports, a fall for food, a fall for art, a fall for labor, a fall for commuting, a fall for corporate slaves, and so forth, but how is everyone spending their fall? I'm always working regardless of the seasons and as a matter of fact, I'd love it if the New Year's would come by already!

But the long nights of fall are when you can make smooth progress as a reader and writer. It's quiet, it's cool, and the night is long… It's a season where you're able to make the most of your time alone. That being said, winter isn't all that much different, but there are things you can only see during that period of time as well.

Things like "Why am I working so hard for these painful memories" or "The night's long but my actual working hours don't change nor am I getting more sleep"… or stuff like that. Of course, it's not all just negative things, but also good and happy things, but it's often that you see into a gloomy future when you look outside the window into the darkness. Although, it's by looking into that darkness that you end up seeing a light.

In that time, you might end up reciting a monologue to someone, perhaps everyone.

In the middle of the never-ending winter night, you might end up finally discovering an answer on the path where the strong cold, headwind blows by. Putting aside whether his answer and her doubt is wrong or not… When you meet someone similar, is it a feeling of affinity that you hold, or is it a feeling of how completely different you two are? If you take a step forward, gain answers and questions, then, what choice will he make?

With that feeling, this was "Yahari Ore no Seishun Love Come ha Machigatteiru." Volume 10.

Appreciation as follows:

To God Ponkan8. Whoopie! It's the malicious older sister, Haruno-chan on the cover! I'm also enjoying SHIROBAKO every week, too! Wonderful! Thank you very much.

To Head Editor Hoshino-sama. Heh, no worries, next time will be a piece of cake, gahaha! I've been saying that for a while now… I apologize profusely every time… Thank you very much… heh, no worries, next will be a piece of cake, gahahaha!

To every single gentleman and lady of Mediamix, I've been a huge bother to you with my selfishness. I'm anticipating "Oregairu" to see an increase in new charms. Thank you very much.

Further, I had the fortune of using the books “No Longer Human” and “Run, Melos!” (Author: Dazai Ozamu of Shinchosha Bunko Publications).

To my readers, we’re finally at the final stage of this story and although we’re wandering off course like always, we’re steadily making progress towards the goal. I’ll be extremely happy to have your support until the very end. Thank you very much.

Now then, with my afterword space running low, I’ll be resting my pen here.

On a certain day of October, as I drink my waaaaarm “Yeah, when it gets cold, you gotta drink this!” MAX COFFEE,

Watari Wataru

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